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THE MYSTERY
OF
SHLEIGH MANOR

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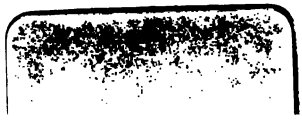

THE

MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR.

A Romance.

BY

ELIZA RHYL DAVIES.

"Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets."
MACBETH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.

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THE

MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR.

A Romance.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY OF ASHLEIGH MANOR IS DIMLY FORESHADOWED.

I AWOKE next morning at the usual hour, and had difficulty to realise that this was probably the last morning I should spend at Ashleigh Manor. I called Laura and we dressed. She chatted to me in her customary manner without making any reference to my departure, whence I concluded the recollection that I was to leave had escaped her, or that she considered her mother's order to me to go an idle command which I did not mean to obey. I resolved not to speak of

leaving her until after I had seen Mr. Merton. I knew that she would fret a good deal if she saw that it was actually meant we should part; and I wanted to save the poor little thing as many tears as I could. She was in good spirits, and prattled gaily enough to me as we sat over our breakfast. I pretended to fall into her humour, and talked to her in her own strain; but never did smiles and mock-merriment conceal a heart heavier than mine. My efforts broke down at last; I could not feign gaiety long under the dark shadow which my sullen and austere future cast upon my feelings.

She noticed the change in me, and asked what made me so pale and "sorry" as she phrased it. I made her some vague answer and told her to get her books out, for I felt it was proper I should do my duty to the last, though hearing her lessons under such circumstances seemed a wearisome, idle business.

She had hardly taken her seat at the table when Mr. Merton entered. Laura ran to kiss him, and as he bent his head to meet her lips, I was struck by an indefinable though singularly visible alteration in the expression of his face. He was pale, but with a complexion ashen-coloured, resembling more the

paleness of a man who has been long sick and confined to his bed, than the paleness of a man in health. But beyond this, I can convey no further idea of the change I noticed. It was of a character so curiously subtle that it eluded whilst it challenged attention. It might have been my fancy, it might have been that the whole moral nature of the man had undergone a change; there was no end to the possibilities the alteration suggested.

When he came forward to shake my hand, he met me with a steady and even a scrutinizing gaze. He smiled as he wished me good morning, but his smile lighted up his face, not with the cheerfulness it was used to diffuse, but with an illumination sickly and even lurid, that served but to expose the expression of misery that underlay the marble of his countenance.

He went to the arm-chair he was accustomed to occupy when he came to my room, and seated himself. His air and movements, slow, even languid in comparison with his familiar energetic action, were filled with melancholy.

"Laura," he said, "I want to have a quiet talk with Miss Malcolmson. Take dolly or your ball, and play in the passage until I call you. Shut the door, and do not make more noise than you can help, love."

By the wistful glance that Laura gave me as she left the room, I fancied that she remembered now I had been ordered to leave the house. She closed the door gently, very gently for a little child; and though from time to time I listened after she had left, I heard no sounds to betoken that she was playing with her ball.

Mr. Merton was silent for some moments after Laura had gone, keeping his eyes bent on the carpet. Suddenly looking up, he said with an abruptness to which I was now accustomed:

"I saw you looking at me when I came into the room, Miss Malcolmson. Is there anything in my face that excites your curiosity?"

"I was not aware, sir," I stammered.

"Come, be candid; you were last night. Confess that you think me looking rather miserable. That is the word—miserable."

"I confess it."

"You do not want me to account for my looks?"

"I think I can account for them, sir."

"Let me hear."

"You are fretting—excuse the word; I can find no other—you are fretting over what I told you last night."

"Fretting! do you think men of my age and with my health *fret?* Be it so. I am fretting as you say over your disclosure. I did not sleep last night. The storm and my own thoughts were too much for me. I look haggard, don't I?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am miserable because I do not know how to act. I have a will of my own, a strong will I believe; though as I told you I was but a lackadaisical and simpering youth. You are to know that there is nothing more fretting, chafing, galling to a strong will than to find itself purposeless. That is my unhappy condition. I know not how to act. It is true I can frame—I have framed—a dozen resolutions. But resolution is idle to me—it is no better than a sound, for I have not moral *vis* enough to carry it out. I come to confer with you, to take your opinion. A feasible idea has entered my mind—one of a hundred which are unfeasible. Tell me now what you think of my idea. But first promise to be candid."

"I promise, sir."

"I suppose it occurred to you in thinking over the pretty scene you had the good fortune to witness from the beach that the first hint of

it to me would effectually separate me from my wife—not spiritually; in that sense we were never married—I mean corporeally?"

"It did occur to me."

"It will not surprise you therefore to hear me say that it is my intention to separate from my wife."

"No, sir."

"In separating from my wife, I desire to do it without filling the public ear with details of my reason. The pride of reserve is a dignified and becoming pride. If my story were to be known, perhaps some fiction-monger would get hold of it and put it in a book, or I might find myself held up by some ingenious dramatist as a mirror to nature for the edification of a thunder-loving audience. That would not be pleasant. No! I must separate from my wife quietly and unostentatiously. There is only one way of doing this. I must either find an asylum for Mrs. Merton elsewhere, or I must leave this house with Laura."

"I was pretty sure, sir, that this would be your alternative."

"Indeed. Then you have been speculating on what I meant to do."

I replied that I had.

"Did any other remedy for this great injury present itself to your mind?"

"No, sir."

"At all events I am glad to find that you have been thinking the subject over. Now of the two alternatives tell me the one you fancied I should adopt."

"I fancied that you would take Laura and retire to another part of the country."

"Why?"

"Because if you remained here with her, gossip and scandal would be excited by Mrs. Merton's absence, and Laura might suffer in consequence."

"Pre—cisely. Really, I must applaud the wisdom that prompted me to take you into my confidence. No greybeard could advise more discerningly than you."

I was not to be deceived by his semi-sarcastic manner. I knew from experience that the more keenly he felt the more he masked his sufferings by an air of indifference.

"I told you last night," he continued, "that for Laura's sake I abhorred taking any step that would supply the gossips with matter for needless talk. For *her* sake, then—for my innocent pet's sake—I remained loyal to the abominable life I had wedded myself to.

But last night I reconsidered this aversion. I reflected that I could not continue living in the same house with a woman like Mrs. Merton. How could I look into her face, and smile, and talk, and act like a reasonable being, knowing her character? Moreover, there seemed to be something criminal in suffering my child to be with her, though but for five minutes. Surely there is a contagion in the very air she respires. I submitted the problem to my mind how I should rid me of her, and at the same time preserve my name —and therefore my daughter's—from the scandal-mongers. Two alternatives suggested themselves—either she must leave this house and settle in some distant part, or Laura and I must go. I determined upon the latter—for the reason you have given. And yet there is another reason. But you can guess it?"

"No, sir."

"Were I to turn her out of this house—don't be startled by my language: in talking of such people we need not be fastidious in our choice of words—I could not be sure that she would leave the neighbourhood. Indeed, I might be sure that she would not. She would remain, if only for the sake of degrading me and her child by the lies she would not

scruple to propagate. You follow my reasoning?"

"Yes, sir; and think it just."

"Of course it is just. I know the character I have to deal with. But if my daughter and I leave, we can go away under a pretence. I will tell Mrs. Merton that it is my intention to take Laura abroad for a year to travel. She may suspect—but what can she suspect? She will be too pleased to rid herself of our encumbering presence to object, or even to wonder. She will exult in her freedom. Doubtless she will enjoy herself—after her kind. My travels with Laura will be protracted to an indefinite period. To all questions, Where is Mr. Merton? where is Laura? Mrs. Merton will reply, They are on the Continent: they are travelling in France, or Italy, or Spain—it matters not. The reply will be uniform, fatigue curiosity and keep suspicion at bay, and preserve my name from the pollution of *talk*. Do you think this ingenious?"

I could not answer. The subject was so embarrassing, so delicate, so sombre, that I could hardly think with precision. That *I* should be the recipient of all these extraordinary confidences was at once puzzling and

—let me use the word, for I felt the emotion—alarming. He did not seem to mind my not answering. Perhaps my surprise and fear might have been moderated had I been more collected and attentive, for I should then hardly fail to have noticed that there was a suggestion of unconcern in his mode of questioning me as if my replies were wholly immaterial. But I was too surprised, flattered, and confused to observe closely.

"And now," he continued, with an air of ease in his manner which accorded ill with his topic, his paleness, and the expression on his face, "let me come to the subject for the discussion of which we arranged this interview. We must remember Laura; the passage is chilly and lonely. Let us talk of yourself. Have you made the calculation of the money owing to you I spoke of?"

"No, sir; I forgot it."

"You did well; it would be of no use. It is not my intention to release you. I still need your services. Do you refuse to give them?"

"No, sir; but——"

"Oh, you are going to speak of Mrs. Merton. But she is deposed, Miss Malcolmson. She no longer reigns. She is dead to you, to

her child, to *me*," he added, with strange emphasis, taking a deep breath after he had spoken. "Come—let me be explicit," he resumed, with a singular smile, "my daughter and I mean to *travel*—conceive that word spoken in italics. Will you accompany us as Laura's governess?"

I answered promptly, with a joyous fluttering at the heart,

"Yes, sir, and thank you for the generous offer."

"You look reassured. Was it positively your intention to leave?"

"It was, sir."

"But you did not like the idea?"

"No, I hated it. Outside of this house I have no future. I shrank from meeting the world, friendless and poor. But, above all, I mourned to leave Laura, whom I love as a sister, and who loves me as children only can love."

"True. Had you no other regret?"

"Yes, sir," I exclaimed, impulsively; "I regretted to leave a kind, a generous, a cordial, a good master."

A look of uneasiness flitted over his face and vanished. He laughed.

"You are young, and it is natural that toys

should please you. Kindness—generosity—cordiality—goodness! so runs your catalogue of my perfections—are toys; pretty things made of tinsel and paint, which you will distrust and ridicule as fit only for tyros in the art of life a few years hence. Well, our compact is settled. You will travel with Laura and me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I found you with a pale face; you look ruddier now. Give me a receipt for the quality, or sentiment, or emotion that tints the complexion, Miss Malcolmson," looking at himself in the glass. "My wife tells me that belladonna makes the eyes bright, and I know that vermilion will give a blush to cheeks which even shame cannot tint. But what is nature's prescription for gay eyes and rosy cheeks? Ah, your only paint lies in the heart, I do believe; but happiness must wield the brush. No wonder the earth is peopled with so many sallow wretches since happiness is your only painter."

"You may call Laura now. I will tell you this evening or to-morrow when we start on our travels."

And with the abruptness that had marked his entrance he walked to the door, and went out.

Not seeing Laura in the passage I sought her in the bedroom, and there found her lying on her bed talking to the doll. I returned with her to the sitting-room, but was so much delighted and agitated by the sense that I was still to keep my situation, and by Mr. Merton's extraordinary condescension in singling me out, as it seemed, for his confidante, that I found it impossible to go through any lessons with Laura. In short, I determined to take a holiday.

"You can put away your books, dear," I exclaimed. "We won't have any lessons this morning, but go for a run in the grounds."

I thought the suggestion would have filled her with delight; instead, she stood looking from me to her books very pensively, with her underlip twitching. Presently, stealing up to me, she said:

"You are not going to leave me, Miss Malcolmson, are you?"

"No," I answered, taking her hand. "I had made up my mind to obey Mrs. Merton's orders to go, though I did not mean to speak to you about leaving until after I had seen your papa, because I did not want you to be sadder longer than I could help. But Mr. Merton will not let me leave you, and so I

shall remain with my dear little girl for a long while yet, I hope."

Now indeed she looked radiant. She raised her arms to embrace me, and danced joyously over to her books, which she put away pell-mell. But for this illustration of her pleasure I should never have believed that the sweet little thing loved me so warmly, though I was well aware that she loved me very much.

The morning was lovely. Although we were advanced in autumn, the sunshine was as brilliant and genial as on a May day. I was reluctant to pass through the hall of the west wing, lest I should meet Mrs. Merton, whom you can conceive I had no wish to encounter. I therefore determined to gain the grounds by letting ourselves out by the old house door.

"It will save us going round," said I to Laura, to whom any door was good that admitted us into the sunshine and the flowers.

I knew my way about now pretty well, though I was a little at sea after passing through two or three of the rooms which led to the old hall. We entered the cold and dimly-lighted gallery, beneath which, on the faded court-flags, the ghost of poor murdered Maud Assheton was from time to time wont to dis-

port itself—so kitchen rumour affirmed; and after making a few wrong turns, we entered the narrow chamber-like hall.

This was the first time I had been in it since the day of my arrival, and it awoke many memories of the fears which had possessed me, the doubts, hopes, and despondency which had kept me company whilst I waited for Mrs. Saunders.

I approached the solid black-knobbed door with the intention of opening it, but found it bolted, locked, and chained. The key was withdrawn from the lock, a padlock was affixed to the chain, and I observed that strong nails were driven deep in behind the bolts, so as to preclude the possibility of drawing them.

"We shall have to go through the west wing after all," I said, eyeing the door with some surprise at the precaution that had been taken to fasten it. And so saying, I took Laura's hand, and we retraced our steps.

The dimness of the rooms, and the damp, earthy smell that pervaded them, inspired me with a peculiar feeling of uneasiness. The few pictures which decorated here and there the various chambers, served, by their tarnished frames and darkling colours, to heighten

and make weird the general gloom. I will even own to casting hurried glances around, as with quickened steps we passed through these austere and silent apartments.

Just as we reached the gallery of the Angels' court, Mr. Merton entered it from the opposite door.

He stopped dead on seeing us, and though the light was so imperfect as but to faintly disclose his features, yet such was the sudden pallor which overspread his face, that had I met him at night looking as he then did, I should have deemed that he was walking in his sleep.

When we approached him, he said, in a deep, strong whisper, "What are you doing here?"

The subdued tone in which he spoke added to the mysteriousness of his aspect. He would not wait for an answer, but pushing open the door he had emerged from, he called, in a violent whisper,

"Come away! you have no business here!"

He had never addressed me so angrily before; and I was much mortified to think that I should have done anything to annoy him. He closed the door after we had en-

tered the room, turned the key, and put it in his pocket.

"Did you not know," he exclaimed, looking at me with a frown, and speaking in his natural voice, but with great severity, "that I had prohibited anybody entering this part of the house?"

"No, sir," I answered, dismayed by his sternness; "I never heard of such an order, or I should not have disobeyed it."

"But what were you doing here with Laura?"

"We have taken a holiday this morning, and we meant to go into the grounds for a run. I did not like to pass through the west wing for fear of meeting Mrs. Merton, and I thought there could be no harm if we let ourselves out by the old door."

"Oh, well," he exclaimed, his expression and voice softening, "of course, if you did not know the prohibition you have done no wrong in coming here. I was angry, Miss Malcolmson, because when I give an order I hate to find it disobeyed. Come, let us get out of this gloomy place. It is not proper air for Laura's delicate lungs."

He led the way rapidly through the rooms, until he gained a cheerful apartment adjoin-

ing the hall in the west wing. Here he paused.

"You will excuse my warmth," he said to me. "I was quite convinced that you knew of my orders. I had desired that the old part of the house should not be entered. The truth is, there are people who will insist on coming to that door, instead of going round to the west wing. They are so blind or obstinate that they will not see that the avenue from where the other branches off is grass-grown and filled with signs of its being disused. My father had this part of the house locked up for the same reason that I do—the ringing of the door-bell bewildered the servants, and afterwards supplied them with a good excuse for loitering. Besides, the rooms are of no use; they are too dingy and small for us moderns, and are hardly tolerable for a few nights even to men who have been in the hunting-field all day. It must end in my pulling the place down—but I forget!"

He looked at me significantly. What he implied had occurred to me as soon as he began to talk. I naturally asked myself why he should take the trouble to lock up the ancient part of the building and speak of

pulling it down, when he had affirmed his intention to leave Ashleigh Manor for ever —or at least until his wife should die.

He fixed so keen a gaze upon me that my eyes sank under it, and exclaimed,

"Association is often stronger than resolution, Miss Malcolmson. At least, it is very apt to make us forget our plans."

"Yes, sir; it has that tendency."

"I ought to explain," he continued, "that I had that house-door fastened yesterday—nay, the day before yesterday; and at the same time ordered the butler to tell the other servants not to answer any summons from the old hall bell. It was the man's own suggestion. He complained of the maids 'larking,' as he phrased it, in the old rooms. Mrs. Saunders made the same complaint before she left."

"Mamma always says the servants are amusing themselves in the old rooms if they don't answer the bell quickly," said Laura.

"I have no doubt they do. Why, Miss Malcolmson, Mrs. Saunders told me that she found the whole of the servants playing at cards in one of the rooms beyond the Angels' Court, at half-past one in the morning. She fancied that she heard footsteps, and being a

plucky woman, rose, expecting to find the house invaded by burglars. She lighted her candle, crept downstairs, and traversing the chambers beyond the west wing, opened a door, and in a brilliantly-lighted room found their worships the footmen, and my ladies the chambermaids, scullerymaids, and cook, seated at a table, busily gambling with a pack of greasy cards, and drinking wine and beer."

"Did you discharge them, sir?"

"No, faith! I was too much amused to be angry. Sheer impudence rarely excites my spleen. I had the recollection of their audacity, however, in my mind, when I met you; and as the butler had repeated my orders, I was disposed to resent their breach. But the matter is explained. Come, get you both gone now into the sunshine. There is something sulphureous in the smell of the rooms we have left, and even this is not untainted. Laura is pining for the fresh air."

Inclining his head, he whispered to me:

"Say nothing to her about my proposed separation from Mrs. Merton. You have not done so, I hope."

"No, sir."

"Quite right. If Mrs. Merton should suspect my object, she would thwart it, if

only to spite me. I have not yet matured my plans; I shall hope to have done so by to-night. I must frame a good excuse to Mrs. Merton to account for my taking you and Laura away. But I must not whisper, or Laura will begin to wonder. I can depend upon your discretion. That will do," he added in his usual voice. "Take Laura with you now, Miss Malcolmson, and give her a good run. You have done right to take a holiday."

He held the door open. We entered the hall and made our way to the grounds. I cast a hurried glance, first at the gallery and then at the drawing-room door, as I passed, being sincerely afraid of meeting Mrs. Merton. Had I reflected, however, I might have guessed that she would hardly have left her bed at that hour. Indeed she rarely quitted her room before one o'clock in the afternoon.

The gay sunshine, the sweet fresh air, the song of birds, the tender shadow of cloud and tree were so wonderfully inspiriting after the gloomy rooms in which Mr. Merton had detained us, that the impression made upon me by his appearance in the Angels' Court, his whispered anger, his mysterious aspect, and

his apology and explanation was, if not extinguished, sufficiently moderated to command but little attention from me. Doubtless had he left me to meditate his language and manner in my own or in one of the old rooms, I might have excited curiosity by speculation, and found something significant in what I had heard and seen. But keen and sparkling sunshine, and the brilliant realities of a shining autumn morning, have a tendency to make the most morbid imagination prosaic. We got well away out of sight of the house, and therefore beyond the range of Mrs. Merton's eyes, should they perchance look forth from one of the windows upon the grounds, and here Laura made me chase her. I ran with as lively a relish of the exertion as health and good spirits could give me. Indeed I felt happy, almost joyous. The sense that I should not have to confront the world as I had feared; the feeling that I was to be withdrawn from the presence of the woman who made my position unsteady and not to be depended upon for a day; absorbed all other considerations. Nor do I think that I should have found anything to cast a shadow over my happiness had I reflected on the separation—probably the eternal separation—that was pending be-

tween husband and wife, between mother and child. So detestable had Mrs. Merton made herself in my sight by the hundred sins of her temper, and by the deep iniquity of her infidelity, that I could not find anything to lament in the secret but certain divorce that Mr. Merton had threatened and would certainly prosecute. She cared less for her child than for her dogs and dresses ; she hated her husband; it was plain, therefore, that their leaving her must give her pleasure, not pain. I might be sure that Mr. Merton would be a happier man when he had placed himself out of the reach of his wife's bad temper ; and as to Laura, it was almost imperative that she should be removed from her mother before she grew old enough to suffer from an example so vile and pernicious.

We amused ourselves with walking and running, and listening to the birds singing, and playing at hide-and-seek among the trees until it was time to go in. When I approached the house my spirits fell ; I dreaded encountering Mrs. Merton. I entered quickly, holding Laura's hand, and was nimbly traversing the hall, when I saw one of the footmen coming down the gallery staircase. His face was so white and scared that I involun-

tarily halted, making sure that something dreadful had happened.

"Oh miss," he cried, "have you heard —have you heard——"

He stopped. I thought for the moment that fear had deprived the man of articulating; but he looked earnestly at Laura, and then went down the hall a few yards and beckoned me to approach.

I dropped Laura's hand and went up to him.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh," he exclaimed, in a strong excited whisper, "Mrs. Merton is dead—murdered!"

"Great God! *murdered?*" I ejaculated.

"Yes, miss, and Wakefield is missing, and it's thought she murdered mistress."

I was completely stunned by the announcement, and felt as if I should sink upon the ground. But Laura came up to me and asked what was the matter. The touch of her little hand, the sound of her voice, forced me to rally my energies; instinctively I felt that the truth must not be told her, or at all events that no lips should speak it but her father's. Turning to her, I said in a voice I endeavoured to make as unconcerned as I could, "It is nothing. We will go upstairs."

And I led her at once out of the hall.

I met nobody on my way to the Red Room. The news was so awful that my mind failed to receive it at once. It seemed to me impossible that such a thing could happen at Ashleigh Manor. We removed our hats in the bedroom. As my mind grew up to the sudden horror that had entered it, my fortitude broke down. I felt myself to be deadly pale, and could hardly speak. To account for my manner to Laura, I told her that I had tired myself by running, and felt faint. Hers was a curiosity that was easily appeased. She was very sorry and tender, and brought me a stool to rest my feet upon; and then, finding that she could do no more, took her doll and began to nurse it, from time to time asking me questions about toys, and begging me to induce her papa to buy her a bird.

Scarcely half an hour elapsed before a housemaid came to tell me that Mr. Merton wanted to see me in the library. I rose with my heart beating so violently that I had to drink a glass of wine to give me nerve. The housemaid, who looked to the full as scared and white as the manservant, told me that she would remain with Laura until I returned.

I ordered her on no account to hint to the child the nature of the deed that had been perpetrated, nor indeed, to tell her that Mrs. Merton was dead, but to play with her and to seem as unconcerned as she possibly could. I then left the room.

CHAPTER II.

I AM CROSS-EXAMINED BY MR. MERTON.

I ENTERED the library for the first time since I had been at Ashleigh Manor; but my mood was not of a kind to allow me to take in even the distinctive points of this richly furnished, but somewhat gloomy room.

Mr. Merton stood with two gentlemen, near the fireplace. The elder of the two gentlemen was a man of about sixty, with a white beard and a moustache, buttoned up to the neck in a black surtout. The other was a younger man, stylishly dressed, with a good-looking but sallow and stern face.

I took in these general features in the hasty glance I threw at them, and then my eye reverted to Mr. Merton.

He was very pale; but I was struck by the fact, that whereas his pallor had, when I

had last seen him, been of a gray and unwholesome kind, such indeed as might be generated by something deeper than a passing though powerful emotion, it was now healthy and imparted to his face the air which a spectator, conscious of the calamity that had befallen him, would look for. This change, which, though trivial enough to read in description, was in reality so remarkable as to arrest my attention at once, was probably due to the expression of powerful resolution visible in his face. Those features which the night before he had touched and called marble, might have been marble indeed, so passionless and stony were they : so shaped, adjusted to his purpose, and finally rendered inflexible by the operation of his vigorous will.

The occasion of my presence was too tragical to involve the form of introduction to the two gentlemen. With a manner and in a tone of voice magisterial in its solemn and measured emphasis, Mr. Merton pointed to a chair and desired me to be seated. Then looking at the others he said :

" This young lady is Miss Malcolmson, my daughter Laura's governess."

The gentlemen slightly bowed.

"Before I ask you any questions, Miss Malcolmson," he continued in as distant a manner as any judge could assume, "it is proper that I should entreat you to reflect well before you reply, as much will probably depend upon your answers. These gentlemen are magistrates, friends of mine, who, on receiving from me intelligence of the terrible and dastardly crime that has been committed in my house, have kindly hastened to come to me that they may support me under this great, this heavy affliction with their sympathy and advice."

His voice faltered, but the expression of his face remained unchanged.

The two gentlemen fixed their eyes upon me.

"A shocking crime," continued Mr. Merton, wiping his mouth with his pocket-handkerchief, "has been committed in this house. My wife has been murdered. She was found dead in her bed an hour and a half ago—stabbed in the neck. She was discovered thus by one of the housemaids who had entered her room in order to seek the young girl, Jane Wakefield, whose bedroom had been found empty, the bed unslept in. By the side of my wife's bed were found a com-

mon table-knife, worn to a point, stained with blood, and a pocket-handkerchief also stained with blood, marked with the initials J. W."

He paused, pressed his hands over his eyes and turned his face aside. The younger of the two gentlemen laid his hand on his shoulder.

"These inquiries distress you, Merton," he said. "Suffer me to ask this young lady a few questions. You are imposing too great a task on yourself."

"No," exclaimed Mr. Merton, speaking in a broken voice which grew firm after the first few words, "I must not shirk what I know to be my duty. Whatever I can do to help justice to detect the doer of this vile and cruel deed, must and shall be done. Miss Malcolmson, you knew Jane Wakefield?"

"Yes, sir."

"She is suspected of this crime. I tell you this to put you on your guard that you may not criminate her by a heedless reply. For, if she be innocent—and whether she be innocent or guilty is known only to her Maker—your answers may confirm suspicion, and, if she be discovered, conduct her to the scaffold. When did you see her last?"

I reflected and answered, "About a week ago, sir."

"Did you converse with her?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was the nature of your conversation?"

"We spoke of Mrs. Merton."

"How did she express herself with reference to my wife?"

"She said that her mistress was treating her cruelly; that her temper was terrible, and she reminded me of a promise I had made her to speak to you and beg you to procure her another situation."

"I remember you told me that she had complained of my wife having refused to give her a character if she left her."

"Yes, sir."

"You also told me that she had shown you the mark of a blow or pinch that my wife had inflicted?"

"Yes, sir."

The two gentlemen whispered.

"You may recollect I told you that I knew little of this girl, although she was in constant attendance on my wife?"

"Yes, sir."

"What impressions do you carry of this

girl's character? But the question is a vague one: let me put it more definitely and explicitly: do you think her capable of the crime of which she is suspected?"

"I do not."

"Why?"

"She appeared to me a nervous, cowed, foolish girl. She seemed to have very little mind. She was afraid to give notice lest she should not be able to procure another situation."

"My experience has taught me to know that these apparently weak and nerveless people are capable of committing the most terrible crimes," said the elder of the two gentlemen.

"My experience accords with yours," exclaimed the other. "I committed to the Assizes a girl charged with arson, so delicate in appearance and imbecile in behaviour, that nothing but the most indubitable evidence of her guilt could have persuaded me that she was capable of such a crime. The heroes and heroines of the criminal annals of this and other countries will for the most part be found sickly and debilitated people."

"Did this girl Wakefield ever speak to you of taking revenge upon Mrs. Merton for the

treatment to which she subjected her ?" asked the elder of the two gentlemen of me,

"No."

"Are you quite sure?" asked the sallow man, austerely.

"Quite sure."

"You may remember, Miss Malcolmson," said Mr. Merton, "that you had some words yourself with my poor, unhappy wife, last night."

"Yes, sir."

"The quarrel originated through your having spoken in defence of Jane Wakefield, did it not ?"

"Yes, sir. It had long struck me that the young creature was very badly treated. Indeed certain statements she made to me, convinced me that her life in this house was a singularly miserable and cruel one."

The two gentlemen looked at one another and nodded.

"She had begged me not to mention to Mrs. Merton that she ever complained of her mistress's treatment, or to speak as if I knew that Mrs. Merton had refused to give her a character."

"Why ?" asked the austere gentleman.

"Because she was afraid that if Mrs. Mer-

ton knew she complained, she would turn her out of the house ; and the girl had an extraordinary reluctance to seek another situation, unless she could provide herself with a character."

"On what did she base her reluctance ?" asked the white-bearded gentleman.

"She was without friends, and feared that unless she could procure another place, she would starve or go to the workhouse."

The austere man shrugged his shoulders.

"In defiance of her wishes," said Mr. Merton, "you mentioned to Mrs. Merton last night that Wakefield had complained to you."

"Not exactly, sir. I asked Mrs. Merton if she would not give the girl a character should she leave her. Mrs. Merton resented the question, and charged me with impertinence."

"She left the room in a passion ?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was present, you may remember. I entered at the moment when high words were passing between you and my wife. When I heard the occasion of the quarrel, I felt at once sorry for Wakefield, because I knew my wife to be violent-tempered, and had little

doubt that she would vent her wrath upon the girl's head. Were these your thoughts?"

"Yes, sir. When I went to my room, I thought of Wakefield, and deeply regretted having spoken about her to Mrs. Merton, because I felt sure that Mrs. Merton would say many hard things to her, and perhaps turn her out of the house for daring to discuss her character behind her back."

"The inference seems to me plain enough, Colonel," said the austere gentleman, addressing the other.

"For my part," answered the Colonel, "I should not scruple to commit on such evidence."

"I have no doubt whatever," said Mr. Merton, with a calmness which, strive as he would, he could not free from an air of strong restraint, "that after my wife left the drawing-room she went to her bedroom, where she found Wakefield. My poor wife, gentlemen, had, as you know, a warm, even a violent temper; and judging from the passion with which she left the drawing-room, I can easily conceive the heat with which she attacked Wakefield. Doubtless she must have maddened by her insults and menaces the spirit of the girl who, I must own, from

the little I had seen of her, I had always imagined a timid, tractable person."

"There is nothing more deceitful than appearances, sir," exclaimed the Colonel.

"And yet I cannot persuade myself," continued Mr. Merton, fixing his eyes on my face, "that any insults or terror inspired by my wife's threats could have given that cowed creature nerve enough to take her mistress's life."

"My dear Merton," said the austere man, "any psychologist would tell you that this murder is the one logical consequence of the nature you describe the girl to possess."

"The deed must have been deliberately done," observed the Colonel. "The girl must have stolen into her mistress's chamber when her victim was asleep, and stabbed her."

"Is she not to be found?" I inquired.

"No," replied Mr. Merton. "The footman told me that he discovered the hall door ajar this morning, which greatly surprised me; but after inspecting the lower rooms and finding everything undisturbed, I came to the conclusion that the door was left open through the neglect of the very man, perhaps, who told me of it; for these footmen can lie with unblushing faces."

"I feel sure of one thing," I said, "if

Wakefield committed this murder, she will never be found alive."

"You think," remarked the Colonel, "that she would destroy herself?"

"I do."

"Why?" demanded the austere man.

"When the rage which prompted the commission of the deed should have passed off, she would be seized with so great a horror and terror, that she would kill herself."

"Nay," said the Colonel, "that is mere conjecture, and pre-supposes more conscience than the girl is likely to possess."

"I agree with Miss Malcolmson. Had you known the girl, you would take our view," exclaimed Mr. Merton.

"When was Wakefield first missed?" I asked.

"She was not *missed*," answered Mr. Merton, "until half-past eleven o'clock. Early this morning, the maids found her room empty, and her bed untouched; but they concluded that she might have passed the night in my wife's bedroom—she had slept on a sofa in her mistress's chamber once before. As the morning advanced, one of the servants grew curious, or perhaps a presentiment of the truth might have come to her; there is always

a subtle sense of uneasiness among those who sleep in a house where blood has been shed. There was a terrible thunder-storm last night, which would have drowned any cry my poor wife may have uttered; and under cover of the thunder, it would be easy for the girl to have left the house without being heard."

"Would she have to go through the gates in order to leave the grounds?" asked the Colonel.

"No. If the gates were the only outlet we should find her hidden somewhere in the grounds. At the southern extremity is a hedge which she might easily force her way through or climb over."

"I don't think we have any more questions to ask Miss Malcolmson," said the austere man.

"We had better call the servants," suggested the Colonel. "Time is precious, and we must make haste to get what clues we can."

Hearing this I rose and giving the gentlemen a bow, left the room. Just as I was closing the door I heard Mr. Merton tell the others that he wished to say a word to me about his child. I left the door ajar and he came out after me.

"Is not this frightful?" he exclaimed hoarsely,

keeping the door closed by holding the handle; "pray pardon the formality of my manner. Those two gentlemen are magistrates—friends of mine. I was anxious to get their advice how to act. I have no doubt, no doubt Wakefield is guilty."

"It is shocking, sir—shocking and incredible. I should have thought her as incapable of such a deed as Laura."

"She left her handkerchief and the knife on the floor. She might have forgotten them in her haste; but *I* think she left them behind her to let us know the real perpetrator of the deed. If so, then she meant to defy justice by committing suicide."

"God help her!"

"Does Laura know her mother is dead?"

"No, sir."

"Break the news gently. Don't tell her that her mother is *murdered.* Let her believe that she died a natural death. The horror of such a crime must not be suffered to enter her pure mind whether she be capable of realizing it or not. I will take care that the fiction is preserved—at least for the present. Go to her now. Oh my God! what an end—what an end is this to the scheme I was telling you about this morning!"

He opened the door and re-entered the library. I cast a hurried glance at Mrs. Merton's bedroom door as I hastened through the hall. My fancy clearly imaged the woman whom but an hour before I had been dreading to encounter, lying on her bed with all the dumb horror of sudden and violent death in her white face. Now that I was away from the men whose questions had withdrawn my attention from the crime, the sense of the awful reality repossessed me. I shuddered as I sped swiftly through the gloomy rooms which intervened between the hall and my staircase, fearful that on a sudden the face of Jane Wakefield should emerge from the twilight of a recess with entreating eyes and tremulous lips, and beseech me to succour her. I reached the Red Room and found Laura playing with her doll in a corner, while the maid-servant sat staring about her with the same bewildered face I had left her with. It struck me that this must be the girl who had first discovered the murder; but I would not ask her lest in her gaping terror she should proclaim more than I desired Laura to hear. I told her that I believed she was wanted in the library; and being left alone with Laura, I called her to me and took her upon my knee.

I much wished that Mr. Merton had undertaken the task of breaking the news of his wife's death to his little girl, for I was immediately embarrassed by the clear, calm gaze of wonder and expectation which she fixed upon me. But I knew that Mr. Merton would be annoyed if he found I had not obeyed his wishes, and so I said sorrowfully:

"Laura, a very dreadful thing happened last night. Your poor mamma died suddenly."

"Died!" she exclaimed; "then she has gone away for ever."

"For ever."

She seemed struck, but not sorry. The truth was she had no defined conception of the meaning of death. She had heard it spoken of as an eternal departure from this world; and plainly, she now considered it wholly in that light; for she could find nothing very much to grieve over in the going away of a mother who had been no mother to her.

"And where has she gone to?" she asked.

"I know not," I answered sorrowfully. "She will be carried to the grave and buried, and we shall never see her again in this world."

The news only provoked her curiosity, and

her curiosity was even less emotional than it would have been had she been questioning me on a fairy tale.

"Where will they bury her?"

"In the graveyard."

"Will they put her deep down and pile the earth over her like other graves?"

"Yes."

"And will she never come to Ashleigh Manor again, and never speak crossly to papa, nor slap me if I don't please her?"

"Never again."

She seemed lost in wonder. Presently she asked in a whisper:

"Is death a great way off?"

"Very, very far away."

"Farther than the stars?"

"Oh yes; it is beyond the stars."

"Beyond the stars! than how can mamma get there? Are people given wings when they die?"

"The good have wings given to them, for they become angels."

"But mamma isn't good, so she won't have wings, and how then will she be able to reach so far as the stars?"

She fixed her eyes upon the blue heavens as though calculating their height.

"Oh, Laura, you must never say that your mamma isn't good now. Death makes all people good, because it carries them into the presence of God, where nothing wicked is admitted. You should feel very, very grieved that your poor mamma is gone away for ever. You must forget that she was ever cross to you, but try to remember only the times when she kissed you and held you in her arms. And whenever you pray you must always ask God to bless her and forgive her, and take her to Himself. God loves good little children and will listen to their prayers if they are offered earnestly."

She was impressed by the solemnity of my manner; my words I do not think she understood. My assertion may seem a rash one; but it is my belief that there is no mind so absolutely materialistic as a child's. Those abstractions to which religion has given names and which men and women realise not by the grosser faculties of the understanding but by the fine and delicate perceptions—intuitions rather—of the spirit, are things meaningless to a child in so far as regards the one and only sense in which they can be understood. There is a cant of wise people having been perplexed to answer the questions of a child. But can it be

doubted that their perplexity was occasioned not because they were ignorant, but because the child was destitute of the spiritual faculties which could make the reply intelligible? Until the inner and hidden life of the things we observe reveal itself, how vain is knowledge! That wisdom is surely worthless which he that runs may read. Such wisdom is a child's; and the child's ignorance seems to make wise men ignorant, not because wise men cannot teach, but because the child cannot be taught.

I felt that I could not teach Laura. Perhaps had she had the capacity to understand, I might not have seen fit to instruct her. Is there not something heartless in teaching a little creature the meaning of death before it has become fairly possessed with the consciousness of being? I would like to expunge the word death from every hymn, from every prayer, from every story that is taught or recited to children. In God's name let us leave unshadowed by that awful Spectre, the pure beam of life which is just struggling out of the rosy dawn into the brilliancy of the morning of existence! Death is a shadow that will rise soon enough in its path; and even as God tempers the wind to

the shorn lamb, so He in His mercy and wisdom makes our human indoctrination of death cruel, by letting the shadow fall so tenderly upon the child that it does not know its own eclipse.

My nerves were too unstrung, my feelings too bewildered and shocked by the awful event that had befallen the house in which I dwelt, to suffer me to protract my conversation with Laura. My mind imperatively demanded the repose, or, at least, the calm, of meditation. She left my knee, and turned to her doll again, but not to play with it. She drew near the window, clasped her doll, and rocked herself to and fro, with her eyes fixed upon the heavens, as pensively as a sad-hearted mother hushing her babe to rest.

Once she startled me by a question,

"Will Jane Wakefield be glad that mamma has gone away for ever?"

I replied that I did not know, as Jane Wakefield had left. The name drove me at once into a long train of speculations. I had no doubt whatever, after having answered Mr. Merton's questions, and heard the comments of the two magistrates, that Wakefield was really guilty of this awful deed. When first I heard that she was suspected of it, I had considered the

charge incredible and absurd. But when I came to think over the reasons I had for supposing her innocent, I had to admit that I could base my presumptions on no surer ground than the apparent nervelessness of her character. The more I meditated on this plea, the more I perceived how completely it must fail to vindicate her. So far as circumstantial evidence went there was the strongest testimony that could be conceived to point her out as the criminal. The handkerchief and the knife went for nothing in comparison with the moral proof of *motive* with which there was not a servant at Ashleigh Manor but knew enough of the life she led with Mrs. Merton to charge her. And then, again, her disappearance. I, perhaps, better than anybody else in the house, was aware of the terror with which she had professed to regard her dismissal; and it was only possible for a greater terror to drive her of her own accord into the world from which she has shrunk with so much alarm. That she would confront the world I did not for a moment believe. Presuming her to be guilty of this crime of murder, I was as certain that the terrible obligations it carried along with it would break her heart, or drive her into self-destruction, as

that I lived. Was it possible to suppose that the faint-hearted creature who had not had courage enough to leave a situation of which the duties, or rather the penalties, were killing her, would find herself sufficiently strong-hearted to dodge by the hundred subterfuges which the crime-goaded wretch has to exercise, the slow but ever-dogging Justice whose nostrils scented the ground she trod, and whose stern and iron front would seem embodied in every face that looked towards her?

No! the resolution that had enabled her to murder the woman whose passion had doubtless driven her mad, would not stop at one crime; and I might expect at any moment to hear that the miserable girl had topped the part of murderess with the hardly less frightful crime of suicide.

CHAPTER III.

HOW MR. MERTON WAS AFFECTED BY HIS WIFE'S DEATH.

HAVE no clear recollection how the remainder of the day passed. We were as far removed from the bustle and activity of servants, messengers, constables, and visitors in the west wing as if we occupied a house a league away.

Our meals were brought to us as usual, but I did not ask the footman any questions, lest by his replies he should make Laura acquainted with her mother's tragical end.

I never passed a more wearisome and longer afternoon. It seemed to me as if something of the perception of the reality of death had been developed in Laura's mind, for she was quiet and silent to an unnatural degree. She was even thoughtful, if so young a child is ever thoughtful. I made no effort to talk to her nor amuse her. The murder had given

me a great shock. The more I thought of it the more awful the deed grew. Mrs. Merton had made herself, in my mind, so peculiarly a condition of life at Ashleigh Manor, that I found it difficult to conceive the tide of being continuing to flow without her. Such will often be found the temporary feeling of those who, moving in a narrow system, find one of the bodies that compose it displaced or extinguished. When the person removed was rendered distinctive by conspicuously good or conspicuously bad qualities, the loss is more sensibly felt.

I was alone after having seen Laura to bed when Mr. Merton came to my sitting-room. He had dressed himself in black clothes, which threw the paleness of his face into strong relief. He looked worn and jaded and distressed; but the expression of resolution which I had marked in the library was still strongly visible. Power of will was exhibited in every lineament. I seemed to recognise it as a power that would outlast his physical decay, and linger in his features after he was dead.

"It is a relief to get into this calm room," he said, casting himself wearily into a chair; "how is my child?"

"She is well, sir."

"What did she say when you told her that her mother was dead?"

"She asked a few childish questions. She is too young to comprehend the meaning of death."

"Blessed childhood! What a glorious privilege is its ignorance! In this sense, a child is immortal. She received the news without a tear?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I have seen her cry when she has broken her doll or lost her ball! She would break her heart if I were to die, I believe. She would fret a great deal if you were to leave her. The child's nature is a compensative one—it gives love for love, dislike for dislike. And she did not shed a tear when you told her that her mother was dead? My God! What an illustration of my wife's character is her child's indifference!"

"Oh, sir! let us speak gently of the dead."

"So we will—so we will; and presently we will not speak of her at all. But you do not want me to be a hypocrite, Miss Malcolmson? You do not want me to pretend to deplore the blow that knocks the irons off

my hands, and the lead out of my heart, and sets me free? Little friend, you have seen me in many moods, but amid them all you must ever have witnessed the deep consistency of pain. Downstairs, before strangers, I may fling sables over my face, and look the grief which society expects to witness. But shall I keep the mask on before you? Would you not, remembering the language I have so often held, suspect that behind the mask my real face was laughing? My wife's death is full of horror—being dead, I would to God her death had been a natural one. The air is rank with this crime. Every eye is charged with suspicion. Murder is the sullennest, the deadliest shadow that can overspread a house—and *still*, I cannot feel grief!"

"Do not say so! Grief will follow, when you have recovered from the shock the murder has given you."

"If it should—then I will allow that you know more of my character than I do. *Should* I grieve, do you think? Ah, you cast down your eyes, and ponder what answer to make. Continue in your reflections awhile, that you may presently look up and tell me that never in this mighty world of hypocrites would there

be a greater hypocrite than I if I should so much as flourish a pocket-handkerchief before my face whilst I spoke of my wife. This is no time for me to grieve. Let the crime chill the blood in my veins if it will;. but let it leave me free to taste and relish the liberty that comes to me after twelve years of abhorred and loathsome bondage."

His eyes glowed, and the colour mounted to his cheeks with the vehemence with which he spoke; but the warm flush soon vanished, leaving his face as pale as stone again.

"What a day this has been!" he exclaimed, sinking his voice into a softer key. "I am worried to death. I look so, do I not?"

"You look jaded, sir."

"The west wing is silent now. There are watchers by the dead body. I would to God they could take it away—take it away at once! When it is buried, you and Laura will come and live in the wing. But there is time enough; we shall have the inquest tomorrow. I wish this bitter business were at an end."

"Will you let me give you a glass of wine, sir," I asked, struck by the strong shudder, resembling a momentary convulsion, that passed over his powerful frame.

"Yes; and if you have a biscuit, you can give it me as well. I have not tasted food since breakfast."

I had both wine and biscuits in the sideboard. I set the refreshment before him. He helped himself to the wine, and began to munch a biscuit.

"I suppose you were greatly impressed by my severe air in the library, were you not? But you can understand, the two gentlemen who were present were magistrates, accustomed to judicial inquiries, and I wanted their opinion on the supposed—no, I must call it the certain—guilt of Wakefield. The sense of being watched makes us all actors. Before my friends the magistrates, I had to look and speak as if I were a magistrate myself. But the judge doesn't live in his wig. He takes it off when he leaves the court, and goes home, and is merry over his wine, and tells his droll stories and fondles his children like a man—which you hardly consider him when you look at his wooden face in the judgment seat. I left my masquerade-dress in the library, and am simple Mr. Merton here."

"You were formal, sir; but not more than it was proper you should be."

"No doubt. It is fit, however, that I should apologise, that should we ever have to confront one another again on this lamentable business, you may understand the reason of my distant manner and cold face."

"Have they begun a search for Wakefield?"

"Oh yes; as soon as she was missed. By the way, did I tell you that a fresh discovery has been made?"

"No, sir."

"A scarf belonging to her was found on the hedge at the bottom of the grounds. The hedge is thick and high. There are signs as if somebody had tried to bore through it—a hopeless experiment. At the top the twigs are broken."

"It is supposed that she escaped over this hedge?"

"Yes."

"But how is it known that the scarf is hers?"

"It is a large silk handkerchief, pink in colour, and was recognised at once as hers by one of the servants, who, strange to say, but only a few days since offered to buy it from her."

"Oh, sir, I fear she is guilty."

"Why, how is it to be doubted? I hope they will catch her! She cannot be far off. My fear is that she will be found dead, should she be found at all."

"I would rather she should be found dead than alive."

"Why? it would grieve you, I suppose, to think of so young a creature being hanged. I remember you took a great interest in her. Had she waited a little she might have saved herself from the *hell* into which she has leapt; for I had not forgotten your request, and meant to find her another place. It is well I did not. Plainly her mission in this world was to commit murder, and some less offending creature than Mrs. Merton might have been her victim—which would have been a pity. Do you understand my reasoning? You think me heartless when in reality I am deeply sympathetic. Had she killed any other mistress but Mrs. Merton, the chances are that she would have robbed children of a good mother, a husband of a devoted wife, society of an embellishment. *Now*, the wrong she has done begins and terminates in the deed. Laura, you observed, showed no sorrow to hear of her mother's death; I have told you I should be an arrant hypocrite to

pretend to grieve; and society, of which you are a member, can well afford to dispense with her company."

The grimness which was wont to characterise his language about his wife when she lived was as strongly expressed in his words now as ever it had been. He looked at me for several moments fixedly, and letting his eyes drop with a peculiar smile playing over his mouth, said:

"I told you that I hoped if Wakefield were captured, she would be captured alive. Under the circumstances her confession might appear supererogatory; for never was deed accompanied by more indisputable evidence against its doer than this murder. But one of the heavy and lamentable obligations crime imposes on the guiltless, is suspicion. Confidence is withdrawn by friend from friend; doubt lurks in every word. It is in this way that crime injures society. It is not the only injury it does it: but it is among the most formidable. And how shall we, the members of this household, escape the suspicion which is the penalty we pay for breathing the air which human blood has tainted? Why should not one of my servants have done this murder? Why not you? Why not I?

There is not one member of this household, Laura excepted, to whom suspicion could not assign a motive that should sufficiently account for his having committed the murder. Here is a deed done in the dead of night, under cover of a storm, at a time when the whole household is supposed to be buried in sleep; no *alibi* could be proved, for each member, with the exception of the maid servants, occupies a separate room; and who is to show that at the time the murder was done, the suspected person was in his bed? Mrs. Merton's temper provides a motive for this crime from *me* to the meanest servant in my employment. Conceive yourself charged, Miss Malcolmson. Mark the circumstantial evidence that could be arrayed against you, and which might be made overwhelming and conclusive by a skilful advocate. It could be proved that last night you had a violent quarrel with Mrs. Merton; that she insulted you, both by her words and by her manner, in such a way as to provoke your fury and determine you to revenge yourself. It could be shown that she had ordered you out of the house, and that you meant to leave it to-day; and from these premises the opposing counsel might wander into a spacious field of

conjecture, represent you as withdrawing to your room bent upon revenging yourself, waiting until the house was silent, and then, taking advantage of the uproar of the elements, creeping stealthily to Mrs. Merton's bedroom——"

"Oh, sir!" I cried, "you terrify me!"

"Well then, imagine *me* charged with this murder. It is known that for twelve years I led the life of a dog with my wife. *You* could prove this against me by quoting my own language. The unspeakable wretchedness of twelve years' duration will surely supply the motive of an act that takes but a minute to accomplish. There is no living creature, indeed, who can say that I am a passionate man; that Mrs. Merton's worst insults ever made me lose my temper. But that would prove nothing. You will be told—I should say the jury will be told—that there have been assassins who had at their command smiles of wonderful sweetness, and who have carried faces so amiable that all but dogs and children have loved and trusted them. I admit that there is this much to be said in favour of me: it might be asked, why should I wait twelve years to ease myself of a load whose pressure—whose crushing pres-

sure, from all accounts—was felt and suffered by me three months after I was married? How would the other side meet such an objection?"

He paused and reflected.

"Stay! I have it!" he exclaimed, looking up with a smile: "they could make you prove that you had told me on the very evening of the night the murder was committed that my wife had betrayed and dishonoured me. Would not here be a web of damnatory evidence?"

"You are acting cruelly to yourself, sir, in pursuing these wild and fanciful speculations," I said, alarmed by seeing him press his hand to his head and breathe deeply and pantingly. He withdrew his hand presently and clasped the arm of his chair so tightly that I saw the veins stand out under the flesh.

"I am a great theorist," he continued; "my delight is the study of the law of probabilities. Take the servants. We might go through the list separately. There is not a servant in this house whose treatment from Mrs. Merton has not been such as to supply the reason why he or she should have murdered her. It is because the hellish brood of suspicion—the fatal spawn of crime—is now

abroad that I would cheerfully consent to lose my right hand that Jane Wakefield might be captured alive."

"She might not confess, sir."

"Let her be caught; confession will follow."

"But whether she be caught or not, how could anybody else be suspected of this crime?"

"Oh don't ask me to give you a reason for gossip and scandal and lies. There are people who, when the character and aspect of Wakefield are described will say, It is impossible that such a woman could have had the spirit to do this thing. The servants are saying as good as this to one another already. You think it yourself?"

"I thought it at first, sir. But I cannot doubt the evidence of my own senses; nor can other people."

"Other people have not your acuteness."

"But she has proved her guilt by her flight. And does not the pocket-handkerchief convict her?"

He made no answer to this; but looking at me steadily said, after a few moments' silence:

"Miss Malcolmson, can you not see where the real tragedy of this tragic crime lies?"

"I see it in the awfully sudden dismissal of a sinful and impenitent soul into the presence of its Maker."

"No!" he cried, stamping his foot; then instantly recollecting himself: "That is a view I have not taken, though it must have occurred to me sooner or later. But the view that I *have* taken of this murder has only reference to myself. If I had lived happily with my wife, her murder—well, I know not how it would have affected me. But her temper, her character, were known; it was also known how she abused my forbearance. I have scores of friends who have been present when she has said things to me which have fallen upon them like thunder-claps—made them look upon one another with dismay and hold their breath whilst they have watched me. I have turned the gross speech, the insult off with a laugh. But these are memories which my friends are likely to preserve. They will occur to them now and——"

He paused, biting his lip, rose, went to the window and looked out. I followed him with my eyes. The night was dark, and I could trace his dusky outline in the panes of glass.

"How sullen the night looks!" he exclaimed. "Where has the moon hidden herself? Are we to have another thunder-storm? I hope not. Such thunder as we had last night would play the very devil with my nerves now."

Turning to me, he added:

"It is a foul thing to be suspected of a foul deed; and there is no fouler deed under those black heavens there than murder. See how gloomy the night is, Miss Malcolmson. Come to the window."

I approached him.

"Those inky curtains," he said, pointing to the sky, "which an invisible hand has dropped between the stars and this world, might be made handsome by the blue embroidery of lightning running down their sides. Let the wind rise and the thunder that followed the lightning would well represent those curtains flapping in the gale. What can be more opaque, more inscrutable, more indefinable than this great darkness? In the embrace of such a protector Villany may raise its head and drop its cat-like tread and walk like an honest man. This is the high-noon of crime. Have you a strong imagination? If so, let us follow in fancy the girl Wakefield whom we will presume to be alive."

The darkness was indeed as deep as he described it; a broad bright moon should have been up, but no faintest beam nor reflection of its silver pierced the black canopy which had unrolled itself across the sky, and which

appeared to be stooping, amid the breathless stillness and horror of nature, to the indistinguishable earth.

"Perchance at this very moment," he continued, "Wakefield is seated upon the edge of the cliff looking down upon the sea which is laced along the margin where the breakers moan, with blue, unearthly rays of light. These far-down gleams appear to her maddened imagination as reflections of the deep and burning hell to which the demon, Crime, is dragging her. Amid the death-like stillness in the air, the voice of the sea becomes articulate with one word—'Murder!' All along the caverns of the cliff the echo is repeated till the air grows difficult with the frightful syllables. She casts her eyes upwards in search of the God whose kingdom her mother has taught her to believe is beyond the blue and shining sky; but she sees no light nor star, nothing but a deep and frowning darkness like a near and scowling face, so that in her terror she looks down again upon the phosphorescent gleams, for the eye must have light when the imagination is delirious, or the brain will go. She shudders with the cold and moans aloud, looking ever and anon over her shoulder into the inky blackness, and

starting with her hands raised as from time to time a piece of the cliff gives way and falls with a sullen boom upon the beach below. As she watches the quivering fires of the sea there shapes itself out of the air a phantom, at which she screams, and presses her fingers over her eyes. But the phantom she beholds is one of those shapes which are more visible to the inner or spiritual eye, than to the physical. She may press her eyes until she forces them into her brain, but the phantom will still float full in her gaze. It is that of her victim lying—as I saw her—with her dead face hardened in anguish and terror, her upper lip tightened upon her teeth, and her right hand raised to the wound which disfigures a white and shapely throat. Ah, God!" he exclaimed passionately, "she cannot live! that phantom will steal behind her, and in her anguish and fright she will leap into the sea!"

There was a look of such intense horror on his face that the picture he had drawn presented itself to me with the force of reality. It seemed as if he veritably beheld Jane Wakefield sitting on the edge of the cliff, and that he saw the phantom which he had imaged, floating before her. I believed that the shock and excitement of the day had unhinged his mind; for

there had been something far more suggestive of delirium in the quick and passionate way in which he had spoken than in his language.

He drew forth his handkerchief and passed it over his forehead.

"There," he said with a forced smile and hollow laugh, "I have furnished you with the last chapter of the romance. Begin it. Your imagination being young must needs be brisker than mine. Figure to me this wretched girl's behaviour when, after having plunged the knife into her mistress, she had rushed from the room."

"Oh, sir, do not ask me. You make the crime horrible—horrible. I feel faint—."

And even as I spoke a feeling of faintness crept over me which forced me to lay hold of his arm to support myself.

Without a word, and with singular tenderness, he led me to a chair. Presently I felt him moistening my forehead with water, and fanning it with his handkerchief. He then poured out a glass of wine, which he held to my lips whilst I drank.

"I have acted inexcusably," he said, softly, seeing me smile my thanks for his care. "Will you forgive me?"

"I am foolish, sir—it is not your fault—but my nerves have been unstrung."

"Yes, and forgetful of that, I am keeping you up when you ought to be in bed and asleep. Miss Malcolmson, let me beg of you for the future to keep my imagination at bay. You provoke me by the attention you give my idle words, and by the interest with which you honour me. I will not be so egotistical as to tell you that I pay you a compliment by my language; but I may assure you that there are very few with whom I am so unreserved as with you."

"I am flattered by your condescension—"

"Pshaw! flattered! never be ironical with me. I am a connoisseur of irony, and only the best quality pleases, or is even tolerable to me. . . . What a day this has been! What a night is before me! Would to God I could skip the coming twelve months."

"You will need a change of scene, sir."

"Not I. I do not stir from this house. It is made dearer to me by the feeling that I had almost left it for ever. How are you now?"

"Much better, sir."

"We must make haste to blot this ugly record out of our short and simple annals. I

wish I could have had Laura with me to-night in my room. It wants six hours yet to sunrise. A tedious time! . . . Hush! how still the night is! The deep silence is oppressive; yet I don't know whether it is not better than the wind with its wild choruses and melancholy solos, and those piteous plaining undertones which are so full of meaning—like voices of the past—to the ear of the sleepless. Oh! life is a poor tale. Poor indeed it must be when the friends of the greatest men find in all their lives hardly enough matter to swell out a grave-yard epitaph. Good-night, Miss Malcolmson. I will not wish you pleasant dreams; but I may desire a deeper sleep for you than I am likely to enjoy."

The next day the inquest was held. Whether from some inadvertency, or whether it was thought that I could give no evidence of value, I was not examined.

It was late in the afternoon before I heard the verdict—a charge of wilful murder against Jane Wakefield. I was further told that Mr. Merton had intimated to the coroner his intention of offering one hundred pounds reward for her capture. My informant was a

footman, whom the murder and the subsequent inquiry had excited in a high degree.

"If master," he said, "would only give me a 'ollerday, I'd wager I'd earn the hundred pounds before this day Thursday next. The constables is a slow body, miss, which it is their business to be, because they don't get no employment to speak of, and when they do get a job, they like to make it go as far as they can, that the public mind, which always has its heye upon them, may believe they work harder nor they do. This girl Wakefield ain't far off, I'll wager. She can't be, miss. Supposin' her capable of running from the moment she set off after spillin' her pore mistress's blood, which could hardly be, for human natur 'ud certainly knock under so much fatigue, she couldn't have reached further away nor a three or four's gallop. Ho! she's done a dreadful thing, miss. There's posters a printin' giving her description, wrote down by Mr. Merton's own self, and horfering one hundred pounds to anybody as will deliver her up to justice, which 'll stare her in the face wherever she turns, and drive her from place to place, and out of the streets into the alleys, and out of the alleys into the woods and fields, and so she'll

go on until she's caught, when she will be hanged, which 'ud be a sad hending for so young a gal, and one I'd rather not think of, miss."

The footman gave me these barren particulars whilst he was arranging the tea things upon the table. Laura was out of the room, or I should have contrived to silence his loquacity. At the same time it seemed idle to suppose that the child would not very shortly get to hear of the manner of her mother's death. The story was told in the face of every servant that we saw. Still it had been Mr. Merton's wish that Laura should not be acquainted with the murder, and I respected his motive sufficiently to make up my mind to have her kept in ignorance of it as long as I possibly could.

I saw nothing of Mr. Merton that day, nor yet on the day following. Laura repeatedly asked me why he did not come to her, and I had to answer that his sorrow for his wife's death was too great to suffer him to leave his room. This answer caused her much surprise. She could not for the life of her see what there was to be sorry for in Mrs. Merton having gone away for ever. Taking her stand-point, and remembering that she was

ignorant her mother had been murdered, I could comprehend the view she took. Her indifference was no sign of heartlessness. She had never known a mother's love. Mrs. Merton was altogether associated in her mind with fierce quarrels and bitter words and cruel sneers, and causeless reprimands, and even blows. How could the little girl be expected to grieve over the departure of such a mother?

I made a point of inquiring after Mr. Merton every time a servant came to my room; and was told that he occupied the library, and had given orders that no callers should be admitted, with the exception of the two magistrates whom I had seen with him. He was pretty well, I heard, but took very little nourishment, and looked worn out and broken down in spirit.

Laura and I did not leave our rooms. I had occupation in fitting myself out with mourning; but the time hung heavily with my poor little charge, who pined for the sunshine and fresh air, and could not understand why she should be kept a prisoner because Mrs. Merton had gone away for ever from Ashleigh Manor.

On the evening of the third day after the

discovery of the murder, Mr. Merton came to see us. He did not stop long. He only looked in to kiss his child, and inquire after her. His manner was singularly grave and reserved. His face had thinned, and was very pale; but his eyes were luminous, not with a healthy brightness, but with the fires of a disturbed and deeply excited spirit. He told me that he had given orders for rooms to be prepared for us in the west wing, whither we were to remove when the funeral was over. I was struck by the pained character of the tenderness he lavished on Laura. Had I not known what his real sentiments were towards his wife's memory, I should have fancied that there was something of regret and sorrow for her death, mixed up with the love which he bore his child. I supposed, however, that the presence of death in his house had forced upon him the perception of his little one's mortality—a truth which great love is apt to lose sight of. He spoke little to me, and what he said was uttered with a gravity that was almost sullen in comparison with the brusque briskness which had heretofore marked his language, and been as conspicuous as ever in the very last conversation he had had with me. He went away

after a quarter of an hour, and I did not see him again until the day of the funeral.

The funeral was an imposing one. From the long line of carriages that followed the hearse to the small and picturesque graveyard of Ashleigh, you would have imagined that Mrs. Merton had been a wonderful favourite in her lifetime. The truth was, this demonstration of sympathy was made for Mr. Merton, whose character was universally respected. I daresay his friends knew enough of the miserable life he had led with his wife to understand that in committing her remains to the earth, he buried a very heavy trouble. But there was something in the occasion of her death that excited their compassion, for him. Whatever his feelings might have been towards her, they could not but believe that the frightful crime that had sundered the bonds which connected them had caused him anguish enough to justify their warmest sympathy. Assuredly no husband mourning by the grave into which a beloved wife has been lowered ever wore a more woe-begone, a more plaintive, a sadder face than Mr. Merton. Those who cared to give credence to the significance of looks might have found sorrow enough in Mr. Merton's face to abundantly excite

their tears. Even I, who believed I knew more of the secret feelings of the man than any one of the crowd who attended the funeral, felt myself strangely stirred by the intense sadness expressed in his pale face ; and witnessed in it one more illustration of the honest and noble nature which had long ago charmed and fascinated me, by judging how eloquently his heart was speaking to him through the bitter memories which crowded his mind, and how it was instructing him, in spite of the wrongs his wife had done him, to mourn his cruel and violent separation from the being whom he had once loved, and whom he had sworn to cherish.

CHAPTER IV.

LAURA AND I TAKE UP OUR ABODE IN THE WEST WING.

THE rooms provided for Laura and me in the west wing were next to the handsome suite of chambers which had been occupied by Mrs. Merton. The apartments consisted of a larger and a smaller room; the first being mine, and the other Laura's. There was another set of rooms over these which were occupied by the servants, and which were gained by a staircase leading from the kitchen. In respect of cheerfulness and convenience and beauty of design, this wing—the last of the addition which had converted Ashleigh Manor into one of the most rambling buildings, I should say, in England—was worth all the rest of the house put together. All the afternoon the sun shone upon it, dying with many gor-

geous colours the slippery tiles of the hall as it poured its golden light through the tinted panes of the great window. At night when the moon was up the effect of the white light stained in its passage through the glass, and lying in green and blue and crimson and yellow flakes upon the floor, was wonderfully beautiful. The gallery, with its richly-carved balustrade and broad stairs and massive banisters, gave to the hall an antique air which it could not fairly claim, for the wing was added to the building certainly not earlier than 1730. Often before retiring to rest have I lingered in the gallery looking down upon the hall, and pleased my fancy by imagining the men and women who had passed up and down the staircase and lounged in and out of the rooms. I had but to refer to the row of portraits that graced the gallery to convert my shadowy creations into material beings; for the costumes represented in the pictures mostly belonged to the period in which the wing was constructed. It needed no great force of imagination to turn these stately ladies and gentlemen, sans cérémonie, out of their frames, and send them trooping down the stairs to amuse me with their movements in the hall. To be sure, had anybody been

at my side at such moments, and marked my earnest gaze, he must have thought me a mad woman rioting in visions which are present only to the eye of insanity. I doubt if I were to stand in that gallery now whether I could image the pictures I then beheld. But to my young imagination those night-shadows with which I peopled the hall from the portraits behind me were palpable enough. Used not I to see ladies with well-quilted gowns sitting roundly upon hoops, gliding with solemn mien upon the moon-tinted tiles, eyeing me askance over their large fans, as if I were an intruder upon their spectral festivities, instead of the magician whose presence gave them their being? Have not I seen gentlemen in neat periwigs and solitaires, tapping their snuff-boxes with jewelled fingers, daintily leering at the ladies as they passed, elegantly posed with well-shaped legs richly stockinged, or mingling with supercilious smiles and fastidious strut among the promenaders? Given such a theatre as that hall, illuminated by the moonlight streaming like a rainbow through the window, and the actors are easily summoned.

I was sorry to leave the Red Room. Association had endowed it with interests which were not to be detached from my heart with-

out a pang. Had I believed that my appeal would have met with a moment's consideration from Mr. Merton, I should have pleaded for permission to remain in the rooms which use had endeared to me. I felt that something of the poetry of my daily life would leave me when I quitted them. It would take me long to people my new apartments with those agreeable fancies, fruits of many a calm reverie indulged in when Laura had gone to bed, which had given the books, the pictures, the chairs, nay, the very walls, a loving individuality, and a tender identity with my happiest and most tranquil moods.

Well do I remember the awe with which I entered my new bedroom for the first time. It was but the other day, so to speak, that I had mounted the gallery staircase with Mrs. Merton to admire her new dress. Now where was she? What a mighty gulf intervened between that and the present time!

I was conducted to the room by a servant; I entered it with Laura, holding my breath and treading so softly, you would have thought some sick person was slumbering within. The sense that there was but a thin wall between me and the chamber which, whilst the house stood, was to be eternally

haunted with the white spectre of murder, made me for the time as fearful as if that spectre had a real existence, and would confront us if we disturbed it. My mood had, indeed, been strung, by the funeral of the morning, into a degree of sensitiveness that made the emotions which possessed me, jar harshly and heavily upon it. I spoke in a whisper to Laura, who responded in the same low key. I entered her bedroom, which communicated with mine, and found it a larger but a duller chamber than the one she had slept in heretofore. There was a door, which I tried but found locked, which doubtless led to the other part of the building. Nevertheless, the rich but not showy furniture made both rooms look cosy and pleasant enough; and I should have found little reason to complain of the change had it not been for the juxtaposition of the apartment which held a memory I could never think on without a shudder.

The door of *that* room the servant had whispered was locked. Mr. Merton had withdrawn the key, and it was no doubt his intention not to let the room be used again while he remained master of Ashleigh Manor. Who would sleep in it? Who would even care to peep into it? Such is the magic—

rather let me say, the pollution—of Murder, that it makes hideous for ever the spot on which it once throws it shadow.

Recall some lovely scene you have visited —some glen, wild, picturesque, beautiful, the deep shadows of rock and tree made melodious by the brawling of a brook and the voices of birds; where flowers tender in hue, fragrant in odour, gleam amid the luxuriant grass, or grace the feet of the gnarled trunks in their velvet coats of moss. You think on it as one of those spots which Peace has made her own; where she lies all day long, her head pillowed among the sweet-smelling violets, mingling her rapt notes with the flute-like pipings in the trees. But one day a human being falls with a death-cry along the grass which bends and drips with a sudden ghastly dew; and the brake rustles and cracks under the quick and stealthy tread of the murderer. There is more than one thing done to death by the hand that struck the blow. The spirit of Beauty which so long held dominion in this most sweet retreat expires as the last gasp of the stricken wretch goes up to heaven; Horror rushes in to fill the empty throne; and you who but a short time before stood entranced amid the loveliness of the scene, now shudder

as you pass it, gazing askew at it with loathing and fear, restless until you have sunk it behind the horizon from which you hasten.

I had not been told whether there was any particular room I should use for the purpose of hearing Laura her lessons. I did not like to enter the drawing-room until I was invited there, nor go to the library, lest I should intrude upon Mr. Merton, whom I did not expect to meet that day. However, we could not remain all the evening in the bedroom, so I rang the bell, and desired one of the housemaids to ask Mr. Merton what room he wished us to sit in. She returned shortly with a request that we would go to the drawing-room. It was not six o'clock yet, and the setting sun was levelling its purple beams through the sparsely-clad trees full upon the tall windows, giving a red radiance to the silver ornaments and mirrors, and illustrating and heightening the costly splendour of the room with its mellow and voluptuous light. The fine apartment brought Mrs. Merton vividly before my mind's eye. There was the chair she invariably occupied, the couch she used to recline on, the handsome volumes she would turn over so listlessly until roused into passion by some innocent

remark of her husband, or yet more innocent action of her child. That she, the one painful condition of life at Ashleigh Manor, was now removed, that she would never more turn with her smart fury upon her husband, nor angrily chide her child, nor court me into flattering her, nor drown her dignity in the tide of rage she would pour out upon the heads of the unoffending servants—was, indeed, hard to realise.

And Wakefield! where was she, now? Had she crowned her crime by self-murder? Her image, as that of her mistress's had done, rose up before me, and I gazed with my mind's eye upon lineaments so gentle and full of suffering, so unimpassioned if the engrained sorrow had not made a kind of passion of its expression, that the incredulity with which I had first heard the charge brought against her renewed itself with all its original force, and temporarily extinguished the conviction of her guilt which had before occupied my mind.

When I recalled her youth, the softness and melancholy of her speech, the flutterings of her spirit so weak and timorous that it stood for ever in her eyes uttering its mild but pitiful appeals for support and counsel; when I considered the timidity that had compelled

her to prefer the cruel servitude of her position to the certain freedom, but uncertain aid which the world offered her, it seemed to me utterly impossible that any fury which might have possessed her could have given her the nerve and courage to commit such a crime as murder.

But even whilst I doubted, those proofs of her guilt which had appeared conclusive to me before, grouped themselves one by one in my recollection until they had formed themselves into an overwhelming evidence. Her disappearance from Ashleigh Manor, or rather her flight, the first conjecture of which, suggested by her unoccupied bed, was to be subsequently confirmed by the evidence of the open hall door, and the finding of the scarf on the hedge; the blood-stained handkerchief; the knife—such a weapon as it was most probable she would use; the appearance of her room, which at least furnished testimony to the absence of premeditation of the crime, insomuch as she had merely taken her bonnet and shawl with her: whereas it was supposed that had she premeditated the deed, she would have collected a few things beforehand, that she might not be delayed a moment in making her escape; these and other circumstantial

proofs which the inquest had elicited, and which, though depending upon no better testimony than that of her fellow-servants, had effectually served to strengthem the conviction which the more unquestionable evidence had imparted—what did they signify? If she were innocent why had she run away? Even supposing—and I thought the supposition improbable in the highest degree—even supposing that, acting under the impulse of a resolution forced upon her by the fury of her mistress on the night of the murder, she had made up her mind to leave the house by daybreak, and had actually gone away before the other servants were up; surely the intelligence of Mrs. Merton's death, together with the news that she was suspected of the murder, would have reached her ere now; and her first act, it was only rational to suppose, would be to return to Ashleigh Manor, and defend her innocence by any proofs it lay in her power to adduce.

But what did this conjecture amount to? Her innocence could only be admitted on the presupposition of somebody else's guilt. If she did not murder Mrs. Merton, who did?

This was not the first time I had indulged in such speculation. But they were forcibly

excited in me now by the surroundings of the drawing-room.

Meanwhile Laura had been going about from table to table inspecting with unaffected admiration here a statuette, there a shell, here an ivory card-case, a mandarin in china, a set of wonderful chessmen in ivory. Heretofore the inspection she now enjoyed had never been permitted. She had been endured in the drawing-room during the evenings only; and her fear of her mother had always kept her quiet, even if Mrs. Merton happened to leave the room for a while. Often had I caught the little creature throwing eager glances of curiosity at the fine things stored in the buhl cabinet and visible through the glass doors like the tempting wares in a toy-man's windows. Now that Mrs. Merton had "gone away for ever" Laura felt herself privileged to humour her curiosity to the top of its bent. I allowed the child to have her own way. She touched nothing—that was all I had to see to, though now and again I would observe her little hands jerk up under the strong desire to handle, though the action was always controlled and followed by a side-long glance at me to see if I watched.

We had not been in the drawing-room

twenty minutes when Mr. Merton came in. He walked up to his child with a slow, languid step, embraced and patted her on the head, and then came over to me. I bowed to him. He cast himself in the arm-chair which his wife had so often occupied.

"The weariest part of it all is over," he said in a low voice. "The funeral is always the saddest part of death. That is done with, and now we are privileged to concern ourselves with ourselves—that is, we may make what haste we can to get out of the shadow of the funereal plumes."

"You look pale, sir. I fear that you feel the shock now more than you did."

"I see you recall my avowal of unconcern. I am no hypocrite, Miss Malcolmson. I spoke what I felt—I meant what I then said. But life is so essentially a routine, a habit, that one may even fret over the loss of an accustomed trouble. This room puts you in mind of her, does it not? This is the chair she used to sit on. How strange, how terrible is life and death! How strange that I should be alive knowing that she is dead! How terrible that she should be dead, with no more knowledge of what is passing over her—of what I am thinking of now—than this block of wood!"

striking the elbow of the chair. "But this offends you as a piece of materialism. My language implies that I doubt the immortality of the soul—of a sentient essence surviving the dissolution of the body, and having knowledge of what is doing in the world it overlooks. God forbid! I believe in the immortality of the soul. I believe in God. I believe in a Saviour, and in the efficacy of His intercession. If I believed not in these things I should be wretched indeed. When I talk of my dead wife I think of her body—of the murdered part of her. Do you believe in apparitions?"

"No, sir."

"You speak confidently. Yet there are ghosts we all believe in—ghosts of dead joys and troubles which rise in the night to keep us wakeful and torment us with their gibberings. Memories are the only ghosts I believe in. Teach me the formula that lays these harassing spirits."

"I know of nothing to expel them. Indeed, I don't think they are meant to be expelled. They are to be sanctified and made welcome by another name—experience; without which we should be fools indeed."

"Nay, experience makes fools of us by in-

creasing our stock of vanity. The experienced man is apt to act on the supposition that he *knows*—the premiss from which asses reason. If he knows anything, it is that he knows nothing. I have been acquainted with men of fourscore who have acted on the strength of their experience with an impetuosity which, had they been sixty years younger, they would have ridiculed. The moralist calls youth the period of folly. I differ from him. If I want a fool I search the ranks of experienced people.

"Open the doors and pull the things out if you like, Laura," he suddenly called to his child, who was kneeling in front of the cabinet. "The ligature that bound your wings is cut now: you may fly and sport in the sunshine of your little heart to your soul's content."

Whether the latter part of his speech was intelligible to her or not, I don't know; she quickly proved that she understood the first part by opening the doors and pulling out, with a nervous hand, some of the fragile contents on the carpet.

"Does she know of the murder?" he asked.

"No, sir; but I am afraid that she cannot long be kept in ignorance of it."

"We must protect her from that knowledge

as long as we can, Miss Malcolmson. Of course if it comes, it comes. Perhaps I exaggerate her capacity, and think it will shock her more than it really might. It is difficult to understand the extent of a child's powers. I often seem to witness a great depth of wisdom in Laura's eyes. But at her age we look more than we know; we reverse that when we grow older.....Whilst I think of it, let me say that I propose to revolutionise the system you and Laura have been used to. I shall want you to keep me company; to breakfast, lunch, and dine with me. It wont hurt my little girl, and I must have her company. Thank God she sleeps in the gallery to-night! Her breath will make the air lighter. The atmosphere wants the purification of an angel's breath where murder has been."

"What room shall I use for her studies, sir?"

"The library, if you like. There are books there. Choose what room you please. Death has passed an emancipation act, and we are free folk now."

His resumption of the familiar levity which made his most serious speech rational, was accompanied by a livelier sparkle in the eye

and a faint flush of the cheek. These symptoms flattered me. At least, I was egotistic enough to know to whom they were owing. At the same time the odd conceits he made use of whereby to express his thoughts, jarred somewhat; I could have wished him to be more temperate in his fancies.

I asked him if anything had been heard of Wakefield.

"Nothing. I have sometimes had a mind to double the reward; not that I think that it would be of any use were I to quadruple it. If she were not discovered within the week, I made up my mind to believe that she would not be discovered at all. I would wager a thousand pounds—if such a bet could possibly be proved—that she is at the bottom of the sea."

"Then you think she has drowned herself, sir?"

"I have no doubt that she has committed suicide—I don't say by drowning; but it is highly probable that she would throw herself into the sea, for I hardly know by what other means she could kill herself."

"I have been thinking much over the murder," I said in a whisper, for Laura was looking towards us, though otherwise well employed with the contents of the cabinet;

"and I find it hard, very hard, to believe that Wakefield could have committed it."

"Yes, it is hard to believe; but those small, feeble-looking, weak-minded people, are often possessed by the fiend. The devil is a cunning rogue, and loves to select those instruments for his purposes which seem the least adapted for them. He does this to blind suspicion."

"It came into my head—not as a likely thing to have happened, but as a probability worth considering—that Wakefield may have been so fiercely attacked by Mrs. Merton that night when she ordered me out of the house: indeed, on the night of the murder—that the girl made up her mind to leave the next day, and actually stole away before daybreak."

"That is an odd notion," he said, thoughtfully. "It would account for the hall-door being ajar."

"Yes, sir, I thought of that."

"But how about the scarf on the hedge?"

"That might be explained by supposing that she would not awaken the gate-keeper to let her out at that early hour, and so made her way out of the grounds over the hedge."

"And her handkerchief?"

"I forgot that, sir."

"Miss Malcolmson, you would have shone at the bar. Portia herself was not more ingenious."

"I don't think there is anything very ingenious in the conjecture, sir; I made it without the slightest belief in it."

"No, you can't believe in it, because it argues the girl innocent. If she is innocent, who is guilty?"

"Oh, there can be no doubt of her guilt. And yet when I think of her behaviour, of the conversations I have had with her, her extreme timidity, almost cowardice, which her looks confessed more than her words, I find it very difficult to believe that she would have killed Mrs. Merton."

"It is always difficult to believe in the guilt of a person whom we have been accustomed to think of as incapable of crime. No respectable villain—I mean a villain who has occupied a respectable position in society—is ever universally condemned, unless, indeed, the evidence of his guilt is made overwhelmingly conclusive by his own confession. If a costermonger murders his wife, although the evidence that he did so is not absolutely damnatory, nobody has the least doubt of his

guilt, and we all clamour to have him hanged. But let your esteemed vicar, say, or Tomson the banker, commit the same crime, and let that crime be attended with the same uncertain evidence, the majority believe him innocent, and if he is hanged, his friends and sympathisers live and die under the conviction that the law has murdered an innocent man. Thus it is with Wakefield. You believed her, as I believed her, and as indeed she was, a well-spoken, respectable girl, and so you are for having her innocent. But suppose Wakefield had been a dirty drab, with red hair and a squint, a habit of whipping out with words not overpolite, and altogether an ugly, offensive woman, you would find no difficulty in believing in her guilt, though if the truth were known this squalid wretch might hide under her dirty gown a heart as honest as yours or mine; while Wakefield, under her neat attire and respectful manner and soft and sorrowful face, should secrete the passions of a murderess. Miss Malcolmson, you are young, and may profit from the advice of an older person: always strive to think justly. Never confound prejudice with truth, nor possibilities with facts. Take life as it is, not as it ought to be, and you will establish a premiss

which will yield you nothing but logic and sense.

"There," he said, "getting up from his chair, "I have some letters to write. I don't suppose I shall see you again to-night. You may make this drawing-room your sitting-room, if you like. You will not be intruded upon by visitors."

And so saying he went away.

When the hour came for me to retire to rest, I looked forward to occupying my bedroom with a degree of apprehension it makes me smile to recall. To be sure Laura was peacefully sleeping in the room beyond, and I found support in her company. But in those days my imagination was a frisky spirit, given to exaggerated capers and grimacings which, however, were quite destitute of mirth; and no sooner was the candle extinguished than Fancy threw down its square of carpet and began its odious tumbling. Nor does this image satisfy me: for Fancy did more than this. It took out its magic lantern, and, adjusting the slides, illuminated the darkness with a series of truly horrible pictures. Such visions were shaped upon the air as I hope never again to witness. It was murder run mad. It was crime converting itself into a

species of moral kaleidoscope and figuring a hundred terrors. I could put out my hand and touch the wall which separated me from the room wherein was locked up as hideous and bloody a spectre as ever haunted a house. If I did but conjecture what form such a spectre could take, supposing it had the power to make of itself a palpable essence, lo! fancy trimmed the light in her magic show-box, slipped in another slide, and there was the tragedy of the murder playing before me on the black stage of the darkness. And as if Fancy dealt out horrors with too niggardly a hand, Memory came to garnish the show-box with her accessories, and evoked out of her depths tales and histories which had made my combined locks to part as a child, and the larger horrors I had fearfully devoured from books at a riper age. Sleep, long delayed, came at last; but the curtain which fell upon the tragedies enacted on the darkness was tapestried with such breathless nightmares, that of the two evils, had the choice been offered me, I should have preferred the gaunt fantasies of my waking imagination to the more active terror of my dreams.

CHAPTER V.

WE LIVE IN THE STRICTEST RETIREMENT.

YOU must not suppose that the disagreeable fancies I have just written about recurred to make every night hideous. I grew used to my bedroom after the first week; my superstitious fears thinned, my reluctance died out; and I discovered that it was possible to occupy a chamber next to one in which a murder had been committed and sleep comfortably.

And as it was with me, so was it with the other members of the household. The servants plucked up their spirits and went about their duties with far cheerfuller faces than they were wont to carry in the days of their bad-tempered mistress. The voice that had been heretofore hushed was raised; the footstep was unmuffled; habit was already doing its business.

From the standpoint of the kitchen, indeed, the murder lost much of its horror in a consideration of the person it had removed from the world. The servants could hardly long continue to think with repugnance and shrinking of the deed that had converted their life from a miserable servitude into an agreeable routine. They could not but regard Jane Wakefield as a species of benefactor who, at the sacrifice of her immortal soul, and probably her neck, had rid the house of an odious and intolerable tyrant.

Laura appeared to enjoy this new government of liberty most. It took her some time to realise the privilege now accorded her of doing pretty well what she liked, providing she did no mischief. But when at last the perception of her freedom reached its maturity, then indeed did the child's soul expand, her eyes brighten, her cheeks grow rosy with high spirits. There was not the faintest element of sorrow or regret at her mother's loss mingled with the manifestations of her delighted heart. Mrs. Merton's death seemed to be, and was indeed, no more to her than had one of the under-servants left the house. Her happiness was almost contagious. Upon the gloom that—in my sight at least—still

made the house austere, her presence flashed like a sunbeam, shining through the window, comforting the eye like the fireplay on the wall from a cheerful fire when the evening is drawing in. I would not check her. She had been so long disciplined by the ungenerous control of fear that I was determined to let her newly-found spirits have their full swing, satisfied that the development of a child's nature is best assisted by happy emotions. Mr. Merton noticed this, and commended me for it.

"Even," he said, "if her mother had been a good mother to her, I would not have Laura taught to fret because her mother is dead. I have a deep faith in Nature, and adore its manifestations in a child. It never betrays the being whom it is suffered wholly to possess. At the age of ten we know no dictator but Nature. If it were needful for Laura to cry, cry she would, for Nature would find her the tears. Never interfere with emotion in a child. It is obedient to higher and wiser laws than we wot of, like the flower is, or the untamed animal that bounds away from the very shadow of man. Selfishness, cynicism, the bad passions of the human heart, instruct us in systems in which we shape and narrow our

emotions to convenient issues. But such systems are fit only for men and women; and the person who applies them to a child—who directs its lovely and natural manifestations of character and heart into the narrow channels worn by prejudice and selfishness, flies in the very face of God. We have nature in our childhood, and human nature in our manhood. Never confound these terms; for the one is the inspiration of God, and the other of the world."

I write down pretty well what he spoke; but I don't want you to suppose that I either agreed with or differed from him. In drawing his character, I do but present you with a memory with as much accuracy as pains and reflection will give to my hand. Whether his sentiments were mine or not is immaterial; but do not believe, because I do not comment upon all his speeches, or give you the full conversations which passed between us, that I either shared or rejected his views.

If the rise in my spirits did not correspond with the improvement visible in the behaviour of the other members of the household, it was not because I had not as great a capacity for being cheerful as the best of them, but because my nature being a highly sensitive one,

reflected the gloom cast over it by the demeanour, the aspect, and very often the language of Mr. Merton.

As the time wore on, his face grew more grave, his manners more abstracted, his whole behaviour more suggestive of a deep and abiding melancholy. The flesh fell beneath his eyes and darkened; his cheeks thinned; yet the intellectual power, the vigour of will denoted by his ample forehead, and by the marble severity of his firm mouth, beamed with unabated force in his full and steady eyes, and lived in the stern immobility of his lineaments.

It was impossible to look at him, and not feel that he was suffering internally to a degree that was to be estimated by the power with which it defied his will and forced itself into the expression of his face. He sought our company, and was constantly with us. He would come to the library where Laura and I were busy with our lessons, desire us to put away our books and accompany him in a walk. Yet our excursions when with him were entirely restricted to the grounds. I believe that he hardly ever went out of them. He would sometimes tell me that the coachman complained that the horses wanted exer-

cise, and ask me to take Laura for a drive. He himself never used the carriage. People called, left their cards, and went away. He did not scruple to avow his aversion to visitors to me. He declared that they merely called out of curiosity.

"They want to see how I bear my bereavement. They would like to provoke me into a laugh that they might go away and gossip about my heartlessness. It takes some time to get well out of society; that is to say, there are always people of a burr-like tendency who will stick to you until you pick them off your friendship and throw them down. Society itself is more easily cut. It has its useful law of compensation; retire from it and it will retire from you."

These sentiments did not take me altogether by surprise; for I had often, in considering his character, judged him a man who would have lived much alone had he been single; and who had entered society only because his wife had carried him to it.

Yet I could not quite understand this abrupt retreatal from the life he had been accustomed to lead. Of course his wife's death gave him an excuse for hiding himself away from the world; but if his language meant anything, it

signified a matured resolution never again to mingle in society, nor, indeed, to renew any of the friendships which his bereavement had suspended.

Still his sentiments were quite in accord with his behaviour. Often when I have been in the drawing-room with him I have observed him glancing over the pages of a book, when suddenly the volume would droop in his hand, his eyes would fix themselves on the carpet, and over his face would pass such an expression of tragical grief—a mixture of pain, dismay, and misery so keen—that I have started on beholding it, and racked conjecture to account for the emotion which had produced it. At such moments, if perchance his eyes met mine, a scowl would contract his brows, and my gaze would sink before the almost furious stare with which he resented my inspection. But observing my terror—and terrified indeed his eyes used to make me—he would rise, approach me with a smile which illuminated without concealing the habitual expression of sorrow and melancholy in his face, and gently engage me in a conversation on some topic which he thought would interest me.

Laura was the one spring from which he appeared to draw the inspiration of those

gentle moods which from time to time possessed him. How he loved that child! I have seen him hold her between his knees, her face upturned to his by his hands, gazing into her eyes with such a fixed intensity that it would seem as if, by the sheer force and magnetism of his will, he was drawing her spirit out of her and mingling it with his own. He appeared to be at peace with himself only when her hand was in his, her voice in his ear, her sweet face under his eye.

There was a lawn at the back of the wing, and on it it would be his pleasure to seat himself and watch Laura at play. With his head resting on his hand, his face shadowed by a broad-brimmed garden hat, he would remain motionless, following with his eyes the graceful movements of the little creature who flitted like a bird across the emerald floor of the lawn. If she came near him he would call her, and take her in his arms, and fondle her, and set her upon the grass again and watch her renew her aimless sport. When, as it would happen, fatigued by Laura's untiring provocations to chase her, I would seat myself near him, he would invariably seize upon his child as a text under which to discuss that strange philosophy of his, which was neither

sentimental nor cynical, but a mixture of both shrewdly seasoned with truth enough to hold me attentive and amused.

I began by pitying and ended by loving him. He had from the first exercised over me a kind of fascination which, having its origin in my admiration of his character, was strengthened and confirmed by his taking me into his confidence and making me the recipient of many sentiments and opinions which he would have concealed in other company.

I was young enough in those days to be easily flattered by a behaviour which partook more of tenderness than condescension; though there was yet condescension enough in it to remind me of our relative positions, and to make, therefore, the compliment of his tenderness more flattering. My admiration of his character was, indeed, sincere. I relished its pungency, I appreciated its native vigour. I adored the fine and powerful will which had illustrated its generosity by the fortitude it had endued him with, to submit without temper or loss of dignity, to the low spirit, the unjust reproaches, the cruel insults, the bitter language of his wife. Let a woman admire a man and she will contrive that the very qualities which detract from his superiority in the eyes of those

who do not choose to survey him with partial judgment, shall heighten his perfections in her sight. There is no limit to her capacity of accumulating excellence on the head of her idol. There were points in Mr. Merton's character which those who did not see him with my eyes, might have found deformities. But those points only struck me with the freshness of new revelations of the nature I loved for its strength, and kindness, and candour, and manliness. I saw him before me possessed with a deep melancholy, his face sunken, his abstractions moody and morbid. I saw his language daily taking a darker hue of cynicism; and found in these manifestations which others might have wondered at until wonder should have grown into a suspicion of the whole man, only fresh incentives to my love. I believed that he was mourning over his behaviour to his wife in the past. It was true enough that his behaviour, so far as I had witnessed it, had been forbearing and amiable to a degree which not one man in ten thousand could have approached in the teeth of so much spite and venom as his wife had assailed him with. But so fine a nature would recur to the past with the feeling that many times had he shown warmth when he should have preserved

his calmness; that many times had he spoken angrily when he should have spoken gently; that many times had he provoked her by sallies of humour when he ought to have held his peace; and now that she was dead,—cruelly killed in the summer of her years,—the deficiencies of which he had been guilty were recalled by memory, backed by the tragical pathos of her end, and wounded him, and fretted him to think that he had not absolutely done that duty to her which he had sworn before his Maker not to omit when he married her.

See what conscience I gave him! See how where perception failed, fancy stepped in with her brush and completed with tender tints the picture which love had painted on my heart!

But is it not the old story? Is not time perpetually making rents in a man's character which a woman's faithful hands repair? Look how lovingly summer clothes with green creepers and soft moss the trunk of that tree into which the worms have eaten, in whose black crevices strange things have taken up their abode: how she hides that ugly fissure with leaves, and how she sets a little violet growing in that dark hole at the roots. And such is a woman's love. She wanders forth

and picks flowers to adorn the man she worships; and if the world would but accept her judgment, it would not find a nobler, handsomer, truer creature anywhere than the idol whose deformities she is never weary of beautifying with virtues of her own culling.

The days passed calmly and evenly. Life now, at Ashleigh Manor, appeared to travel on the smoothest of wheels, on the most elastic of springs. Winter drew nigh. Keen winds rose and sang their sharp-edged songs around the windows, through the eaves and down the chimneys of the house. Not a little weird and eerie was the music these aëriel bagpipes sometimes sounded in the night; and often have I lain awake striving to master the language of those mysterious voices.

From time to time I would ask Mr. Merton if any intelligence had been received of Wakefield; but his invariable reply was in the negative. On these occasions he would profess a great contempt for our system of police, and wonder if he should ever live to see the day come when society should find itself protected by men as shrewd, active, and intelligent as the rascals and villains by whom society was injured.

"I believe her to be dead," he once said to

me; "but those whose business it is to know such matters better than I, declare that they have no doubt she is alive. They don't see that their conjecture is rather defamatory; for what sort of men must those be whom a young, inexperienced, terrified creature like Wakefield can outwit and keep at bay?"

As the time went on, however, I noticed a disinclination in him to speak of Wakefield. He grew uneasy when her name was mentioned, and changed the subject as speedily as he could. And really, the subject was hardly one he could like to dwell on. That it would not pass out of his mind while flesh and soul held together, was to be suspected and feared from his ever-growing melancholy. It would appear as if the stroke that had killed his wife had also killed his capacity for ever being happy again. I could not be surprised that he should show himself averse to discussing any subject that had reference to the deed whose memory lay like lead in his heart.

I can hardly guess what ideas his friends formed when they found how completely his isolation cut them off from him. For the first few months they might have forgiven what they would probably regard as an oblation to

public opinion; but they must have been considerably astonished when they discovered that his withdrawal from society was likely to endure. Nobody could suppose for a moment that he had loved his wife. I daresay many matronly hearts had beaten high when they heard of Mrs. Merton's death, for it made one of the richest men in the county a widower, and furnished agreeable hopes to the mothers of every marriageable girl in the neighbourhood. I judged this from the persistency with which many ladies called to make inquiries after Mr. Merton's health, and his "darling little girl." The vexation his retirement would cause, could hardly fail to inspire them with a certain amount of ill-nature, and I had no doubt that several little stories would get into circulation, which Mr. Merton might hardly relish to hear. Indeed there was a great deal to be said by people whose imagination was made nimble by the light weight with which Truth rode it. There was no difficulty, for instance, for Mrs. Allears to suppose that the poor man's retirement was occasioned by his conscience, which incessantly tormented him for his bad treatment of his wife, which no doubt, Jemima, was the cause of her shocking bad temper. Nor

would it have given Lady Sneerall much trouble to conceive that for all *she* knew Mr. Merton might have egged on the wretch Wakefield to murder her mistress, and then have furnished her with the means of flight to America or Van Diemen's Land; a conjecture which prim Miss Cheek would readily top by whispering with bated breath that it was not absolutely impossible, but Mr. Merton may have murdered his wife himself. I don't mean to say that such malignant opinions were ever affirmed; but if once a man or a woman has the bad luck to make society ill-natured, there are no limits to the scandal which it is capable of pouring out upon them.

I will own, for my part, to being as much surprised by Mr. Merton's retirement, as any of the imaginary ladies I have written of. His melancholy made him appear to me to stand so much in need of enlivening influences, that I could not comprehend his motive in depriving himself of them. At all events, if he does not care to meet his friends (I would think) why does he not go abroad? A tour through the continent, or even a change of scene in England, would do something for his spirits. Why does he not go to London? He has his clubs there, and could find a

hundred distractions which should still keep him independent of the society he seems so averse to.

I remember one evening asking him the question. I told him that I felt sure he stood in need of a change, and added that he might have no fear for Laura, for I would do my duty to her as zealously in his absence as if he were present to watch me.

"I am sure you would," he answered. "I have great confidence in you, Miss Malcolmson; you have shown a sister's tenderness and devotion to my little one, and I thank you for it from my heart."

"I have done nothing to deserve your thanks, sir," I exclaimed, delighted by the praises I had had no intention to provoke. "I wish I could do more. I wish it were in my power to return the many kindnesses you have done me."

"What kindnesses?"

"They make a long catalogue, but I can remember them all."

"You must have a good memory to keep you grateful. Where gratitude is concerned, the memory is nearly always at fault. But what now about my going away?"

"I think you need a change, sir."

"Do I? What puts that into your head? I fear you are one of those good-natured souls who love to make their friends out ill. I am not ill. I want no change."

"I don't say you are ill; but I think that Mrs. Merton's death has greatly depressed you, and——"

"And what?"

"I was going to say, after a north country proverb, that a sore heart makes a sore body: in other words, that your depression may make you ill if you do not resolve to get the better of it."

"Upon my honour, Miss Malcolmson, if I did not know that you were not that remarkable and famous institution clept the British Mother, who has been twitted and hocussed, and jeered at by all our comedy writers since the days of Shakespeare, and whom every novelist—male novelist, understand—loves to pillory and pelt, I should conclude that you had a marriageable daughter in the background, and that you were striving to soften my heart in the fires of your philanthropy, that it might easily receive the impress of the fair one you hide behind. That is a long-winded speech, is it not? and a severe one, you think. No, I don't mean to be severe.

I take you at your worth. I know I have your sympathies, and what is better, your good opinion, have I not?"

"Yes, sir,"

"To be liked and respected, is what pleases me. Preserve your faith. The esteem of a single being is of immense consequence. And you want me to go away? My kind little friend, if it were in my power to take Memory and lock it up, and ride out into the world without it, I would go forth now—with you and Laura. We would follow the sun, chase its westward course, and live for ever in its benign eye. But I don't care to ride after the old fashion, on a pillion. What use mounting into my saddle, to feel the hag, Memory, seated behind me, clutching hold of my waist, and though my horse be as nimble as Pegasus gone mad, and mount the very heavens themselves, be grasped for ever in the cold embrace of the spectre? The ancients fabled a river of oblivion and called it Lethe. Lead me to it, and I am your humble servant. Do you know the road?"

"No, sir."

"Nor I, unless it lie through the churchyard. That must be it. It is the stream that bubbles up under the sexton's mattock.

But we may not stoop to drink of that stream of our own free will. We must wait until Death gives us the signal to kneel and quaff. Then down we drop, and lapse into forgetfulness."

Here you have a specimen of the way in which he evaded the discussion of a subject on which he appeared reluctant to speak decisively. Once or twice, I think, I told him again how much I thought a change would benefit him; but he shirked the subject just in the same way as I have described; though the last time I spoke to him I noticed an air of resolution pervading his half-bantering, half-serious language, which cautioned me that I might be thought impertinent if I adverted again to the matter.

This obvious disinclination to leave Ashleigh Manor puzzled me far more than his withdrawal from society. The one caprice I might account for by suppositions more or less plausible, and satisfactory enough to answer that need of explanation which the unintelligible is pretty sure to inspire. But his adhesion, if I may so speak, to his house, I could not comprehend. There was no reason in the world that I could either discover or invent, why he should not go away, if only

for a week. Other men would have done so. Other men, after the shock of such a blow as had befallen Mr. Merton, would have made haste to escape the deep gloom that overspread the house, and not have returned until they had picked up enough sunshine in their travels to make the scenes they revisited gayer and more inspiriting.

But I noticed that Mr. Merton seemed to dislike even to extend his walks beyond his gates. So far as I could discover, all the exercise he took was in his own grounds. He seemed the victim of some singular spell that detained him in one spot. He even tried to extend the influence of that spell to me and Laura, and often checked us when we were going to the sands, or into the country for a stroll, by asking us to bear him company in the grounds.

Whether I could have reasoned the mystery of all this away, supposing he *had*, after some months of this sort of life, left Ashleigh Manor, I cannot tell; doubtless I should have found a motive for it, of some kind or other. But as the time passed his unquestionable aversion to quitting his house gained strength; and so marked did this become at last, that I began to suspect that, unless there were

some deep mystery underlying this strange behaviour, the shock of his wife's death had inspired him with a kind of delusion, and that he was nursing the fancy, be it what it would, into a species of mono-madness.

CHAPTER VI.

ONE OF THE FOOTMEN GETS INTO TROUBLE.

IN the middle of December the winter set in with extraordinary severity. Heavy gales, whose thunder seemed the echo of the sea which their blasts had maddened, swept against the house, charged with frequent hail-storms and the more blinding snow. Stript of every vestige of their autumnal livery, the trees ground their naked branches together, and tossed their skeleton limbs to the heavens as though deprecating their wrath.

We abandoned the drawing-room as a sitting-room for the warmer and cosier library. The room was a dull room in summer, but a delightful one in winter. Here were books and snug arm-chairs, and charming pictures delighting the eye with a perpetual summer of Italian skies and azure seas, or represent-

ing wagons loaded with hay, or reapers busy in the breast-high corn. Here, also, was one of those immense grates which our grandfathers delighted in, with broad mantel-piece richly carved, and capacious chimney up which the yellow flames roared themselves into smoke, like other orators who know no better inspition than gas.

It was a pleasure, during the long evenings, for me to sit in this room, with Laura on my knee, whispering tales that held her listening with her eyes wide open, whilst Mr. Merton sat in an arm-chair opposite, sometimes looking up and smiling as fragments of my fairy-lore caught his attention, but more often letting the book sink, and fixing his gaze on the fire with an expression of pathos so deep and pitiful as silenced me for the time to witness.

There had been a heavy fall of snow one day; but about lunch-time the wind veered round, the snow ceased, the sullen dome of cloud broke up, and the sun burst out with keen winter brilliancy from the widening rifts of blue.

A sunbeam falling upon Laura's pretty face made her crazy to run into the snow. Her appeals were irresistible. I carried her up-

stairs, muffled her well up in fur, and forth we sallied.

Ah! what joy for Laura, to be the first to set the signet of her tiny foot upon the smooth snow, whiter than the foam which settled upon the beach. She set me to work to help her to make a snow-man. Diligently we wrought. Happily our marble was plastic, and needed no other chisel than our fingers. Soon we had erected a tolerable pair of legs, a fairly-defined body; and I, being the taller of the two, saw to the head while Laura scooped up the feet.

Having created this being, our next business was, like that of the gods, to convince it of its mortality, or possibly it would have grown arrogant, and ridiculed the notion of any sunbeam being powerful enough to dissolve it. So we stepped aside and began to pelt it with snow-balls. I wished Mr. Merton had joined us; for here was a text under which his cynicism would have rioted. I knew enough of him, however, to guess what sort of sermon he would preach. I could figure the zest with which he would mould a large snow-ball and hurl it at the defenceless image.

"Miss Malcolmson," I could fancy him crying, "conceive me to be Society, and that

figure Society's victim. This snow-ball represents a lie. Mark! I have thrown it. It did not touch his head, proving that the lie leaves his reason sound; it did not go near his breast, proving that his heart is unaffected by the blow; but it struck him in the back and made him totter, and you saw some tears of snow shaken out of his face, which persuades me that if I make a bigger lie, I shall knock him over."

Laura with a snowball succeeded in breaking an arm off. I struck his calf, and left him standing on one leg. Laura, more dexterous in her aim than I, decapitated him; and thus was left nothing but a maimed and ugly torso.

"Observe," I could fancy Mr. Merton saying, "that figure symbolises reputation. Is it a painter, an author, a statesman, a woman? No matter. Do but see how our lies have maimed it. Great heaven! was it worth your while to take so much trouble to reduce that poor figure into a monster, when, if you will give it time, yonder sunlight shall dissolve it so completely that the very earth into which it melts shall not be able to yield up even its death-drops? Let us accept the moral, and mourn in yonder snow-image a type of our insignificance, our nothingness in the eye of

that father Time under whose gaze we dissolve and vanish. Why need we precipitate our dissolution by hurling lies at one another?"

When we had pretty well tired ourselves out with our occupation of creation and demolition, we re-entered the house, bringing with us out of the snow faces as rosy as if we had been sitting before the fire. The clouds had all passed away by this time; and the keen, breezeless air and the white brilliancy of the sunlight, gave us so cheery an invitation to a walk, as nothing but the snow could have obliged us to decline. Even on the doorstep the wintry beauty of the scene detained us. On the lawn the snow was furrowed by our sports, but beyond and all around it fell and rose in soft undulation of printless purity. We seemed to have been transported into a land in which all Nature's handiwork was of snow. The trunks of the trees, indeed, stood black against the white perspective; but the bushes and shrubs and smaller trees were completely coated, and sparkled in the sunshine as if they were formed of the most delicate and fragile crystal. Meanwhile, among the high trees the snow fell soundlessly from the encumbered branches, so that it would appear as if the shadows beneath them were caused

by the snow-storm, which had got entangled among the interlacing boughs.

After removing our things we returned to the library. On entering the room we found Mr. Merton there speaking to one of the footmen, who stood near the door twirling his fingers. I was about to withdraw, when Mr. Merton called out, "Come in, Miss Malcolmson." I judged by the expression on his face that he was greatly vexed, though there was no indication of temper in his voice.

"I have nothing more to say," he continued, addressing the man; "I am willing to overlook this in consideration of your previous good character; but understand distinctly, and repeat what I tell you to the other servants, that if any one of you disobeys the orders I have given with respect to that part of the house, whoever it be shall leave my service on the day I make the discovery."

The footman went out with a very blank face. Mr. Merton turned to me.

"I have never yet taken the trouble to replace Mrs. Saunders," he said; "but such a house as this must have a housekeeper. There must be somebody to superintend and direct the servants. I was thinking of asking you to undertake the duty. Would you?"

"Yes, sir, with pleasure. I fear that you will not find me very competent; but I will do my best."

"There is nothing to do. I shall only want you to pay the bills at the end of the week, and that you can do without leaving the house. What I chiefly require is, some sort of watch kept on the servants. I shall want you to go into the kitchen now and then; in short, imagine yourself mistress here, and see that the servants do what you would require them to do were they in your pay. You will be learning a useful lesson; and by setting you to this work I shall be entitling myself to the gratitude of the gentleman who may have the good taste to choose you for a partner in life."

I answered with a smile that I feared the lesson I was likely to learn at Ashleigh Manor would hardly profit me in the sphere to which the gentleman who fell in love with me would carry me.

"What sphere? You grow modest. Wealth doesn't make sphere, if that is what you mean."

"I meant to say that whatever small chance I have of getting married, I have no chance at all of marrying anybody who will give me a dozen servants to control."

"But if you could only afford to keep one servant you will still thank me all the same for showing you how to manage a dozen. If you can cook a dinner well for a hundred, you can surely cook a dinner well for one. But this is beside the question. In looking after this house you need not neglect Laura. The duties of housekeeper must be made quite subsidiary to those you have hitherto discharged. Let them only employ your leisure. You will do very well I am sure. I don't want to have any strangers about me if I can help it. You know my habits; you have my interest at heart; above all, you are a lady, and the servants are more likely to prosper under your control than under that of one who is hardly superior to them. . . . You told me, I believe, that you did not believe in ghosts?"

There was something so odd in this abrupt departure from the subject he was discussing, and something so droll, at least it struck me as droll, in the question into which he had deviated, that I burst into a merry peal of laughter as I replied that I did not believe in ghosts.

"The thought seems to divert you," he said, with an amused face; "well, I suppose we can all laugh at such fancies in the day-

time. . . . And not all, either. That big fellow who has just left the room hardly looks like a ghost-seer, does he? Your true ghost-seer, I take it, ought to be a bilious man, with a lank yellow face and narrow forehead, and cursed with a Scotch love of metaphysics. Mardon (the footman) is quite the reverse of all this, barring the metaphysics, for which he may have a taste, for aught I can tell: a plump rosy-cheeked man, with, perhaps, an immense appetite. Will you credit that this man of beef and beer, not only declares that he saw a ghost, but by way I suppose of impressing us with the truth of his assurance, swears that it half scared him out of his wits."

"Where did he see the ghost?"

"That is the serious side of the affair. You may remember my telling you that I had given strict orders that nobody should enter the old part of the house. I think I stated my reasons to you."

"Yes, sir; you told me that Mrs. Saunders and others had complained of the servants loitering in the old rooms, under pretence of answering the hall bell."

"That was it. Besides, as the house was disused, I did not wish the servants to enter it. I suppose a man is privileged to have his

own way in his own house. I gave the order, and it ought to have been respected. But this man Mardon coolly takes it into his head to go on a *tour d'inspection.* He found the doors unlocked, owing to my having neglected to withdraw the keys the last time I went over that part of the building, and made his way as far as the east wing. Either he had no object in this survey, or he refuses to state it."

"What does he say, sir?"

"He says that he went because he had nothing to do, and would have gone into the grounds but for the snow. He told me this to my face, and even went so far as to ask me how I could expect him to get on without a little exercise now and then. A rather cool hand, is he not? a thorough servant of the Britons-never-never-never-will-be-slaves kind, eh? You see how badly I stand in need of a housekeeper, and where your work lies."

"Yes; yet Mardon appears an excellent servant."

"So he is. I have never had occasion to find fault with him before. I am happy to say, however, that Nemesis was abroad. Our gentleman on returning from his stroll came

through the Angels' Court, and there he saw what he terms a ghost."

"What did he see, papa?" asked Laura.

"Why, his impressions seemed to have been rather confused. All that he says was, he saw something. Of course I couldn't condescend to question him on such an absurdity; but I am heartily glad the Something appeared, whatever it was, for the story he is pretty sure to tell to the terrified people in the kitchen, is more likely to make my orders respected than the most horrible threats I could hold out."

"Perhaps he saw the ghost of Maud Assheton," I said, with a smile.

"You can ask him if you like. Most probably it was a shadow of a cloud passing across the window, to which his horrified imagination forthwith gave arms, legs, and a head. Those big men have often very little hearts. In a case of burglary it is always the largest footman who creeps first under the bed, and leaves the little scullery-maid whom all the kitchen have abused and ridiculed, to give the alarm."

"Did Mardon tell you that he had seen this ghost, sir?"

"No. I overheard two servants in the

gallery talking of it. I came out of my bedroom and challenged them. They would have been glad to fib, for Mardon is a favourite in the kitchen, I believe, at least among the younger ladies. They gave me the truth, however, on my demanding it, and informed me that Mardon had seen a ghost, and where. There was a good deal of honest terror in their faces when they spoke, and though I was very angry at first, and strongly tempted to dismiss the transgressor on the spot, I reflected that the story he had brought with him from the old part of the house, would effectually keep him and the others out of it. Besides, the man is a good servant, and I should have difficulty in filling his place with his equal. However, I have rated him soundly."

"Why don't you like the servants to go into the old part of the house, papa?"

"How should a wee bairn understand the reasons of an old man? The old house is a dull, sullen, cheerless place; we have no use for it, and it is therefore better locked up. Can you understand that reasoning, Lorry?"

"Yes, papa."

"Before you come of age—no, I mean before you marry—if I am spared, I will pull

most of those old rooms down, erect in their place a large central hall, well-lighted, with good staircases conducting to the upper stories, and with corridors leading to the wings. I will make a noble mansion for my Lorry to live in. But there is time enough—time enough."

"Your friends the antiquaries won't be very pleased with the improvements," I said.

"I dare say they won't. But what pleased the sixteenth, won't do for the nineteenth century. I like large rooms, large windows, plenty of light, plenty of air. How can you expect a mind that has received the science of such a century as we are living in, into it, to tolerate the panelled dungeons in which our ancestors immured themselves? The fashion of the age of iron won't do for the age of gold. I would not have the exterior of the building touched, for that would spoil a noble specimen of Time's handiwork. But inside we will by-and-by clear away some of the superfluous walls, and make the building as regal in its accommodation as it is in its aspect."

"At all events, your improvements would put a stop to the ghost nuisance."

"Yes. The ghosts won't care to revisit

such an unfamiliar scene as the bricklayers will make of the house. When the walls have been tumbled, and the hall built, we will summon a bishop to scatter holy water upon the floor, and mutter any words he chooses for the proscription of unfriendly spectres. I for one will be happy to kneel and receive the drenching and the benediction."

Saying which, with a short laugh, he quitted the room.

I was never of a very curious or inquisitive disposition. It generally needed something obviously strange to pique me into a close examination of its nature. Hence it was that the reason Mr. Merton had assigned as his objection to anybody entering the old part of the house, satisfied me.

Whether, at that period, I should have found his reason satisfactory had I narrowly inspected it, I hardly know. In simple truth, I did not give the matter a thought. It was enough that he had pronounced his orders; I did not speculate upon his motive. Had he requested me to use one room in preference to another, or a left hand instead of a right hand staircase, there would have been nothing in his directions to excite my curiosity. Certainly had I been Bluebeard's first wife, he

never would have committed a murder; for I should not have had the least anxiety to peep into the closet he might have forbidden me to enter.

This languor of curiosity was due to diffidence. I ever hated the notion of being thought an intruder. I could sympathise readily with other people's troubles, or pleasures, or opinions, if they volunteered the statement of them to me; but I never cared to provoke their expression. This was the reason why I had felt myself so greatly flattered by Mr. Merton's confidential tones; for, knowing it was not due to any finessing or questioning on my part, I could only ascribe it to certain qualities, visible to and relished by him, which made me proud and happy to think I possessed them.

I will own, however, to having been made sincerely curious by the story of the ghost that Mardon had seen. Mr. Merton had told me to question the man, and I had determined to do so. I fancied I might be able to elicit more details from him than he would like to communicate to his master. I had often spoken to him before, as he was the servant who had chiefly waited upon Laura and me in the Red Room; and he likewise it was

who had ventured on the confident assertion that if Mr. Merton had given him a holiday, he would have gained the reward by capturing Wakefield.

I found no opportunity that afternoon of speaking to him; but having occasion to go to my bedroom during the evening, I met him in the gallery.

"I hear, Mardon, that you met with a fright this morning."

"A ghost, miss."

"Yes, so I have been told. Surely it must have been your imagination."

"I don't know, miss. I see a shadder move as I was going across the gallery in the Angels' Court. It was a ghost or nothing at all; and as I am sure it were something, why then, miss, it must have been a ghost."

"But you don't seriously believe in ghosts?"

"I do, miss. I never see one before this morning; but my mother, who lived to be a very old woman, often saw ghosts, and was so used to it that they couldn't scare her."

"You say you saw a shadow?"

"Yes, miss, a moving shadder. It stood out agin the wall on a sudden-like, and then disappeared."

"Had it arms and legs?"

"I couldn't swear for certain that it had arms and legs. It were a shadder, miss; and shadders don't want legs."

"But ghosts do."

"Ho, but ghosts don't walk. They're only shadders. They don't creep, nor crawl, nor fly, but somehows they move. None of the ghosts that mother saw had legs. They was mostly dressed like babies in long clothes like corpuses; and very alarming they are, miss, to see, as mother used to say until she growed used to 'em, after which she wasn't to be scared."

"But in this case I am quite sure your ghost could have been nothing but a shadow; Mr. Merton suggests it might have been caused by a passing cloud."

"Well, miss," he exclaimed in a rather awe-stricken voice, "begging your parding for contradicting of you, I might have thought it were a shadder of a cloud or my own eyesight, which is often afflicted with specks passing over the heyeballs, which the doctor calls bile, miss, if I hadn't heerd a groan."

"A what?"

"A groan, miss."

"A human groan?"

"It weren't a man's groan; it were a wo-

man's groan. It were that, miss, as brought the perspiration upon my face and made me feel faint, as I told the butler who was joking me for a bit of a coward."

"I daresay one of the boards creaked under your feet, and that sounded to you like a groan."

"No, miss," he answered, shaking his head solemnly, "it weren't a board. It were nothing like a board. It was a groan, miss; that's what it was."

His emphatic manner made me smile.

"And what took you to that part of the house in defiance of Mr. Merton's orders?" I asked.

"I am very sorry to have disobeyed master," he replied humbly, "and I am truly grateful to master for having forgiven me this onced as it is not likely to happen again. I hope you'll tell master, miss, that I'm humbly sorry and truly obleeged."

"I am sure he thinks this. But tell me your object in entering the old house?"

"Master asked me that question, but I hadn't the courage to answer. It were rakin' up a disagreeable matter as there's no servant in the kitchen but knows, and chiefly myself, who am humbly sorry, miss, to see master's

pale face, and heartily wish him more happiness."

"But what was your motive?" I inquired, feeling my curiosity stimulated by his roundabout evasions.

"I should be sorry for master to hear, miss," he answered deprecatingly. "He'd sure to be angry. He'd think it a libbuty, which it were; but people like master as rolls in wealth don't know the temptations we poor servants has to turn a penny."

For the moment I thought the man was going to confess a piece of meditated rascality to me.

"Come," said I, apprehensively, "I should like to have your answer. You may depend that I shall not repeat anything you tell me to Mr. Merton unless your disclosure be of a kind it would be my duty to acquaint him with."

"I don't think you'll see anything to mind, miss," he replied, probably catching a glimpse of my thoughts. "I'll tell you, miss, and leave it to you to judge if it ought to be repeated to master."

He paused as though in search of words wherewith to express himself; and then with a very footman-like cough said:

"I have often laid awake o' nights, miss, thinking of Wakefield and of master's offer of a hundred pounds to them as might capture her. One hundred pounds is a big sum, miss. A man could marry on one hundred pounds. One night, not very long ago, in thinking over Wakefield and the murder and the one hundred pounds, and her not captured yet nor ever heard of, it came into my head, quite on a sudden, that Wakefield might have hid herself in one of the old rooms, miss; on which I thought to myself how very much I'd like to have a look through the house, where, maybe I'd find her skiliton; for as master's locked it up she couldn't have come out, and must have died of starvation. It were a strange fancy, miss, to come into my head on a sudden."

"Very," I answered, with a shudder.

"Well, miss, that thought kept me awake night after night. I would lie with my eyes open a picturin' to myself that dreadful girl a skiliton in one of the rooms. It kept me in a perspiration, and wore me downright thin, which you might have noticed, miss."

"No, I can't say I did."

"Well, miss, cook and the butler did, but I wouldn't tell them the reason because it had

likewise come into my head that if I could find her I should be entitled to the reward. The butler, though he's a very respectable man, and him and me pull together very friendly, is rather avericious as the saying is, and if he was to have got hold of my idea, he mightn't been above using it. At least I thought this, always supposing Wakefield's skiliton were lying in the old house."

I nodded.

"At last my feelings was worked up to a point; and though I knew I should be very much afraid to meet with the dead body, and a good deal more afraid if I was to find her alive, I thought of the hundred pounds, which gave me courage like a dram of brandy, and after hesitatin' and hesitatin', made up my mind to look through the old house this morning, not guessing that master would ever know I'd bin there, and feeling sure he'd pardon me if I discovered the girl. And that, miss, is just the whole truth, and why I disobeyed master's orders."

"But you saw nothing?"

"Nothing but the sperrit in the Angels' Court, and heerd the groan."

"Well, I need not detain you any longer. I may have occasion to mention this to Mr.

Merton; but you need not fear. I will take care that you shall not suffer. Your idea is a strange one, and I dare say Mr. Merton might give orders to have the old house thoroughly searched."

"If you do speak of it, miss, I hope Mr. Merton won't be angry. I'm humbly grateful to him for forgiving me; and will never enter the old house again."

"I will repeat what you say, though I don't think there is any need, for I know that he has no intention to discharge you."

He went down stairs and I entered my bedroom.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FOOTMAN GETS INTO WORSE TROUBLE.

I WOULD not speak to Mr. Merton that night; for he had been in a very depressed mood during the evening, and I had no wish to advert to the subject which I could not but consider was the cause of his melancholy: I mean his wife's death, of which the mention of Wakefield would probably occasion the discussion.

I nevertheless determined to acquaint him with the footman's idea, and recommend that a search should be made throughout the old part of the house for Wakefield.

He probably noticed my thoughtfulness when I returned to the library, but made no comment upon it. Mardon gave me a rather appealing look when he entered with the tea-tray; but I had told him that I meant to

speak to Mr. Merton, and could not conceive that I could injure him by doing so. On the contrary, I thought that Mr. Merton would be pleased with the man's notion; for though the subject of the murder was now almost dead among us, yet for some time after the crime had been committed Mr. Merton had often expressed the most earnest hope that Wakefield would be captured, in order, he would say, that she might confess to the deed, and clear the house of the suspicion which he feared overshadowed it.

I found something so weird in the footman's conception that I could hardly rest that night for thinking and dreaming of it. The matter-of-fact way in which he had spoken of "that dreadful girl's skiliton" lying in one of the rooms, as if he considered that the horror of death by starvation were but an inadequate expiation of the crime she had committed, impressed my mind with a sense of the reality of the idea. In other words, I believed that if search were made for the unfortunate creature she would be found dead in one of the obscure rooms of Ashleigh Manor.

This notion, having been put into my head, began to play the maddest pranks with my imagination. I pictured Wakefield, after the

murder, as having rushed from her mistress's bedroom to her own chamber, where she hastily equipped herself in bonnet and shawl, and with a tread so echoless that the breathless terror in her ears could catch no sound, descending the stairs and opening the hall door. I could image her hastening to the hedge, over which she should make wild efforts to climb; then, finding the barrier insurmountable, that strange and almost incredible fear of the world which had detained her in her miserable bondage would rise superior to the terror that, but just now, had urged her into flight. I figured her looking back at the house with a white face, returning, closing, but not shutting the door, lest the click of the latch should awaken an echo in the hollow hall, and retreating—retreating up the gallery staircase, through her mistress's bedroom, gazing with fascinated eyes upon the stirless form, the dead face that cursed her with its gaze as she crept by, up the staircase to the back corridor that led to the deserted part of the house, groping her way through chamber after chamber, until she should come to one room from which there is no other outlet than the door that admitted her; feeling for the key and locking herself

in. Her brain is crazed. She thinks not of starvation; but only how she is to hide herself. The morning dawns, the day passes, the night comes again. Oh, God! it was frightful to think of her, locked up with her crime, and with that other devil, Hunger, whose sharp fangs were presently to fasten upon her side.

Was not this a night-thought villainous enough to make sleep fevered? Whilst I was awake, I fought with the hideous fancy; but sleep made my will powerless, and Imagination reigned uncontrolled. There was deep horror in the dream I dreamt of her, lying in her shawl and bonnet, with her thin shrunken face up-turned, every line in it carved by the hand of Agony.

My waking thoughts, my dreams, strengthened the conviction that the remains of the hapless girl lay in one of the gloomy rooms of the house, and that a search would bring them to light. When Mr. Merton met me next morning at the breakfast-table, he asked me if I was ill. I replied in the negative, and added that I should like to have a short conversation with him, if he could spare me the time after breakfast. He gave me a look so keen and searching that my colour changed

and my eyes fell. When I raised them again I found that he was still regarding me. Paler I should have held it impossible for him to grow, so habitually pale was his face now; and yet paler it seemed to me he had become during the interval between the time when our eyes met. After he had withdrawn his gaze, I noticed that he avoided looking at me. He talked to Laura, but there was a forced air about his language and his manner so marked that I wondered he took the trouble to speak at all.

When breakfast was over, he told me that I should find him in the library. After waiting a few minutes, I bade Laura remain in the drawing-room until I came to her, and followed Mr. Merton.

I found him walking restlessly to and fro, with his arms crossed upon his chest and his lips tightly compressed. When he saw me he pointed to a chair, and folding his arms again, asked in a strange, peremptory manner which I was quite unaccustomed to see in him, what I had to say.

"I am sorry to trouble you, sir," I began, rather tremulously, for his manner made me nervous; "but I wished to tell you that I had a conversation with Mardon last night, and

that he explained to me the reason he had for entering the old house."

"Well?"

"He remembered that you had offered a reward for the capture of Wakefield. The idea occurred to him that the girl, instead of having left Ashleigh Manor, as was supposed, had secreted herself in one of the old rooms, and that her dead body might be found there."

"And what have *you* to say?"

"Only this, sir, and to suggest that a search should be made, as it seems to me highly probable that the unfortunate girl might, as the footman suggests, have hidden herself in one of those rooms, where she would perish of hunger."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

He turned from me and walked to the window, through which he stared for some moments, without speaking. When presently he turned, I noticed that his face had brightened, or, at least, that it had lost that hard forced look with which he had first confronted me.

"Mardon's object in entering the old house was to seek for Jane Wakefield, and secure, if he could, the reward I have offered?"

"Yes, sir."

"He is a very ingenious man. His idea is good, and might even be original if it had not long ago been anticipated. What did he find?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! not a ribband, a scarf, a hair-pin? no token whatever of the girl having sought an asylum in that part of the house?"

"No, sir."

"Then he was not more fortunate than I who ransacked the building, accompanied by a magistrate and a constable, two days after the murder?"

"I had no notion that the house had been searched by you, sir. If so, I should never have troubled you with Mardon's idea. It seemed to me good, and so I thought I would speak to you about it."

"You have done very well, Miss Malcolmson," he said, quite gently and courteously; "but I would ask you to remember, that when such a crime as Murder is committed, there is very little the ingenuity of a man like Mardon can suggest which those whose business it is to hunt after evidence and criminals cannot conceive themselves. Murder is an outrage that Justice never forgets. Let a man commit

that deed, and succeed in escaping suspicion, and he will find, if he live, that after an interval of fifty years the crime is still as fresh in the recollection of the Law as if it had been committed the day before. I know for a fact that the most diligent inquiries are still being made for Wakefield. I don't think myself that she will ever be caught; but it is impossible to tell."

"Strange," he continued, after a little silence, "what love there is amongst men for hunting down their fellow-creatures. I will venture to say that your thief-taker finds a pleasure in his sport which the most rabid fox-hunter at his hardest gallop cannot feel. Conceive our friend Mardon at this distance of time still actuated by a longing to capture Wakefield! I have no doubt that the hope of gaining the reward had something to do with his exploration; but he would find a delight in hounding her down, whether he should discover her alive or dead, which would be quite independent of the money-recompense. You have prejudiced me against him, Miss Malcolmson."

"I am very sorry, sir. He thoroughly regrets his disobedience, and besought me to ask your pardon. He was reluctant to tell

me his motive; and I believe only made his confession in the conviction either that I would not repeat his words to you, or that you would not be angry with him. I promised, when I told him that I should speak to you about searching the house for Wakefield, that he should not suffer."

"I cannot help it. The man exhibits qualities which have disappointed me—I may say, disgusted me. A true-hearted man, a worthy man, would loathe the money that should come to him through such labour as this footman would set about. I will have no Jonathan Wilds in livery about me. Besides, Wakefield's capture is not his business. If he wants to turn constable, I dare say he can. But whilst he wears my livery, and takes wages to wait upon me, let him stick to his duties. I forgave the disobedience, but I will not forgive the motive, which I think a low and offensive motive."

Mr. Merton rarely lost his temper; but he could speak with great severity, and a better illustration of his language than the mood which dictated it might be found in the frown that darkened his forehead. Such a frown now gathered; I feared that the footman's fate was sealed, and deeply regretted not

having reflected more on the probable consequence of my statement to Mr. Merton before I made it.

"I hope, for my sake, sir," I said, timidly, "that you will continue in your first resolution to overlook Mardon's error."

A slight smile twitched the corners of his mouth as he answered,

"You plead warmly, Miss Malcolmson. For Laura's sake I would do much for yours. We will dismiss the subject for the present. I want to know how it happens that a young lady of your acuteness should have regarded the footman's idea as an original one? how it is that you did not guess that that idea had been carried out long ago?"

"I don't know, sir. I suppose I did not reflect. Yet even if I had reflected, I dare say I might still have thought the notion good, because I should have taken the suggestion from him as an understood thing that the house had not been searched. *Had* it been searched it would have been known—so at least I would have argued—and Mardon would have hardly thought it worth while to have gone over ploughed ground."

"I don't suppose that Mardon or the other servants knew. The search was made privily

by my friend, myself, and a constable. I led the way into all the rooms, but we found nothing. Was it to be supposed that we should neglect making such a search when the hue and cry was raised, and the country scoured ?"

"No, sir."

"I made it more for the sake of form than from any idea that we should find the girl. Her scarf had been discovered on the hedge —you seem to forget that, and so does Mardon. The hedge was broken, and the shrubs trampled. Not a creature that saw those signs —and those who saw them were experienced hands—but was sure that they indicated the escape of the girl out of the grounds into the country beyond."

"Well," I exclaimed, "sad as either alternative is, I would far rather think that she had thrown herself into the sea than that she had lingered in the agony of starvation in one of those dreadful rooms."

"Ay," he answered, letting fall his arms and turning away, "one ghost is enough in a house. Had she died of starvation here the rooms would have been walked by a more hideous spectre than the mind can receive. Was it Maud Assheton's ghost Mardon saw?"

"From what he says, I don't think he believes himself that he saw a ghost. He imagines he heard a groan which probably excited his fear, and as the groan must needs have been delivered by something supernatural, his terror set to work to carve a ghost out of the shadows on the wall."

"Where did he hear this groan?"

"In the Angels' Court, sir."

"Maud Assheton's court! the plot thickens. I fear the fellow must have overdosed himself with brandy to give him the requisite courage for his enterprise. He is a plucky fellow. He would make an invaluable hero in case of an attack by burglars upon this house. What did he do when he heard this groan?"

"He broke into a cold perspiration."

"Yes, and broke into a run as well, no doubt. Whilst he was about it he need not have stopped running at the kitchen but held on his way through the hall door. That would have saved him the trouble of resuming his trot. The qualities must be bad which urge a man into such a search. The fellow that is capable of this is capable of worse deeds. I will advise him to join the constabulary. There is a dearth just now of able-bodied men. He will be serving his country better

by catching criminals, which I can see is his bent, than by powdering his hair and making love to the housemaids."

Here our conversation, so far as regarded the footman's confession, terminated. Whether it were positively his intention to discharge Mardon or not, I could not guess; but I felt it would be idle to attempt any further appeals.

In simple truth I did not like to say anything to cause Mr. Merton annoyance or make him stern with me. Every day was giving strength to a feeling for him which would send me into long reveries and fill my mind with emotions so complex that I knew not whether to think them blissful or painful. The measureless distance that separated us, quickened my sensibilities into exquisite susceptibility, and made me shrink and shudder before the mere thought of his ever detecting the love that his tenderness and manliness had given birth to in my heart.

Indeed, so imperative did I find the need of concealment, that I may really say that I even succeeded, after a fashion, in disguising my true feelings from myself; and it was only from time to time when the fitful fire of emotion overleapt as it were the barrier of my will, that I recognised in the revelation the illus-

tration of a passion of which the possession pained me with mingled fear and joy. When he spoke severely to me he little knew how deeply his constrained words, his sudden frowns, stirred and tortured me; as little did he guess how his tenderness moved my love, and how my passionate impulses uprose to meet his smiles and gentle speeches, bearing them back into my heart and making them joyous memories on which my spirit fed.

Often in watching him—furtively, and ever on the alert to avoid the contact of his glance lest his keen eyes should read the secret which my very heart trembled to hold—often in watching his face, stern in the grasp of a pitiless and abiding melancholy, have I wished to occupy such a station in life as would suffer me to be frank with him and soothe and inspirit him with those fine and delicate ministrations of which I knew my love to be capable of prompting the inspiration.

He guessed nothing. His melancholy, whatever its cause, was too absorbing, too abstracted to allow him to take note of any signs in me, which, perhaps, had his mind been happy, his quick glance would have been shrewd to interpret. For it would be foolish were I to suppose that however rigorously I

may have dissembled my feelings, some hint of them did not, unconsciously to myself, escape me. Remember how much I was thrown with him. Remember the fascination he had exercised over me from the very first; my age—nineteen—the most susceptible period of life before fifty; the compliments he had made me; the enduring provocation of his melancholy acting upon sympathies which had been daily ripening into love; my admiration of his character which I thought noble because of its capacity of endurance, because of the vigour of his will and intellect, the manliness of his sentiments to which his cynicism served but as a spice, giving piquancy to the native flavour without in any way disguising it; above all, remember the self-contained life I led at Ashleigh Manor, where the first impressions my mind had received were left undisturbed by other influences.

Two days passed before I missed Mardon. I noticed his absence from the dinner-table; I then remembered that he had not waited upon us at lunch, and indeed that I had not seen him during the preceding day. I could scarcely believe that Mr. Merton had discharged him; nor would I ask him if he had done so. But my curiosity being excited

when dinner was over, I inquired from one of the housemaids what had become of Mardon.

"He has left, miss."

"Left? Was he sent away?"

Yes; he had been sent away. Pretty zealously must I have discharged my duties as housekeeper not to have known this before! Yet it is certain that I had *not* missed Mardon for some time, nor had any of the servants mentioned his dismissal to me. I was pained because I regarded myself as having been the cause of his leaving. I wondered that Mr. Merton should have acted so precipitately. He had praised the man as a good servant; and really, since the act of disobedience had been pardoned, I could not see why the motive had not been included in the forgiveness.

However, I made up my mind not to mention the subject to Mr. Merton. I felt that the matter was a delicate one. I had begged Mr. Merton for *my sake* not to discharge the man; and he had dismissed him for a reason he undoubtedly considered conclusive. Thus it was that nothing was said; but all the same I could not help being struck with what I considered a capricious act of severity.

CHAPTER VIII.

WE ARE THREATENED WITII VISITORS.

THE winter wore on; January and February with their wild snows and keening winds came and went, and we entered March, that deceitful month which conceals under the fitful smiles of April the rigours of December.

It was now nearly five months since Mrs. Merton's death. Nothing had been heard of Wakefield. From time to time rumours of the world's doings—echoes of the busy hum outside the cloisteral calm of Ashleigh Manor —were brought to us by the few friends who found admittance into the house, and who would sometimes join our little circle during the long evenings. Thanks to their gossip Laura had learnt the secret of her mother's death. But whether she were too young to comprehend the nature of the crime, or that

she was so absolutely destitute of affection for her mother that she could not witness anything shocking in the deed that had removed the cruel-tempered woman and initiated a long and gleeful holiday-time; certain it is, she exhibited neither pain nor curiosity; she did not even ask me a question.

Perhaps it might have been my duty to correct her indifference by bringing clearly before her the wickedness of which Wakefield had been guilty. But murder was no text for me to lecture a child under. I preferred that she should be indifferent and ignorant, than that she should be indifferent and yet know the truth; for I was quite sure that her mother's ending would give her no concern, let me exhort, explain, and argue as I would.

The visitors at the house, at this time, comprised the magistrates to whom I have already introduced you, and some half-dozen other persons, ladies and gentlemen, rich, quiet, self-possessed people, whose society Mr. Merton did not seem averse from, if he did not court it, nor show any great relish for it.

I sometimes fancied that he collected this handful of callers about him to keep the gossips at bay. The two magistrates and their

families had always been visitors since Mrs. Merton's death; the others were admitted at a later day. I presumed Mr. Merton returned their calls, though I hardly know when, for it seemed to me that he never went out of his grounds.

I welcomed these visitors, for I regarded them as indications of the breaking up of Mr. Merton's resolution to hold himself entirely aloof from society. But I soon found that he meant to limit his friends to the number I have mentioned. There was a great attempt made by the neighbours to revive his acquaintance when they heard of these people being received. But Mr. Merton made no sign, and society at Ashleigh gave him up as hopeless and incurable.

When the spring set in, I made up my mind to hear him announce his resolution to travel. I was sure that his melancholy would prove too great a burden at last, and that he would make an effort to shake it off either by a journey abroad or by a residence in London. I still firmly believed in the theory I had set up, that his mind was fretted by the accusations of memory. He mourned, not for his wife, but for his conduct towards her, which I conceived his noble integrity to have

weighed in the scale and found wanting. Certainly his melancholy was a conundrum I was bound to solve as best I might; and the first solution that had suggested itself seemed still the true one. What else, indeed, was I to think? My curiosity was not morbid enough to make a mystery of what it chose to find obvious. The very complexities of his character rendered my solution satisfactory. Here was no ordinary mind. Here was an intellect imaginative and tenacious, a capacity of conception powerful enough to make a dupe of his judgment. His wife's death had filled the recollection of his behaviour to her with a sense of shame. She appealed to him from the tragic pathos of her grave. She had been wicked, evil-tempered, envenomed of tongue, loveless as a mother, unchaste as a wife—yet how had she expiated her sins! The tranquil death of one who has wronged a true heart will make it grieve; but grief will be charged with reproaches in a noble mind if that death be violent and shocking. It will feel that it has been too cruelly avenged. It will turn with a generous despair to the memory of its enemy. Such emotions would be made more poignant when, as in the case of husband and wife,

there are tender recollections of young hopes, gentle dreams, gleaming like stars amid the tempestuous clouds of the past.

But how long was Mr. Merton's melancholy to endure? The self-reproaches which (I presumed) excited it, must surely die away before long. And with their decay, there could not fail to arise in a mind so vigorous, impassioned and keen, a longing for the world, a longing for the world's enjoyments, which long abstinence would colour with brighter hues than they had ever worn.

Yet the spring went by, and still he did not speak of leaving Ashleigh Manor. The spring went by, and still, with the exception of the few persons I have mentioned, he remained as dead to society as if his house were his grave.

And never once did my fancy take alarm —did I find in his behaviour, in his melancholy, in his thin and sunken face, any suggestions of a deeper mystery than such as my reason could solve for me. I marvel to think of that time and of my blindness. I marvel to reflect that never once during the long reveries I indulged in, of which he was the one and central object, that intuition, that instinct did not flash upon my dark and con-

fident reason the light of revelation, and teach me the truth before I had to master it through an experience how bitter!

One bright morning in May Mr. Merton entered the dining-room, in which we invariably breakfasted, holding a letter.

"Laura," he exclaimed to his child, who was standing with me at the window, "how would you like to have a friend to stop in the house and play with you?"

"Is it a boy or a girl?" asked Laura.

"A girl—a young woman, I should say. She should be as old as Miss Malcolmson by this time."

"Oh, she would not care to play with me," said Laura.

"Shall we give her the chance? There can be no harm trying. Miss Malcolmson is a dear friend to you, and as pleasant a playmate as your heart could wish. But I dare say a little rest would do her no harm; and after you have had a taste of your new companion's powers of entertaining, you would turn with zest to your old playmate."

Addressing me, he continued:—

"There was a schoolfellow of mine to whom I was greatly attached, who married the daughter of an old and valued friend of

my father. He was in the army when he married, and after some eighteen or twenty years of active service, attained high rank and died. He must be dead now at least three years. Lieutenant-General Sir William Callender—that was the distinction he achieved; I refer to his rank—his title he inherited. The widow is in London, with her daughter, Constance. She here sends me a letter of condolence, with a long postscript, in which she invites herself to spend a week at Ashleigh Manor. Shall we have them, Lorry?"

"Yes, if they are nice."

"I can't say whether they are nice or not; but they are old friends, and we must not be inhospitable. How will you relish their intrusion upon our peaceful circle, Miss Malcolmson?"

"They may serve to colour our peace with a little cheerfulness, sir."

"Ah, you don't think we are very cheerful, then?"

I did not like to tell him that I was sure *he* was not; and whilst I thought for a reply, he asked me another question.

"Miss Malcolmson, you have been in my house a good many months, and it is singular

that I should still be ignorant of your Christian name."

"My Christian name is Kate," I answered, with a slight blush, wondering if he would like the name.

"That was my wife's name," he said, looking up at me. Whether the faint smile that curved the extremities of his mouth were excited by his thoughts or by my blush, I cannot say. "It's a pretty name. I prefer it to Katherine. My wife was christened Katherina. Is that how you spell yours?"

"No, sir, Katherine."

"Why wasn't I called Kate, papa?" asked Laura.

"Because you were called Laura, dear. I wanted to christen you Ariel."

"Oh, what a pretty name. Why didn't you give it me?"

"Your mamma opposed it. I liked it because Ariel is an exquisite little being created by Shakespeare—a pure and sweet spirit, who flits like an angel of peace through the storm-clouds, and helps the drowning wretch out of the raging sea. The name would have pointed an allegory which I will explain to you some of these days when you are as old

as Miss Malcolmson. Speaking of Miss Malcolmson, why don't you call her Kate?"

"May I?" she asked, looking up at me with a bright smile.

"I give you leave, Lorry," said Mr. Merton, "and I hope Miss Malcolmson will accept it as a hint not to call me sir."

His eyes rested on my face for a moment; the blood rushed into my cheeks, and to conceal the sudden emotion his gaze had excited, I turned my head, and pretended to look out of the window. In a few moments I was pale with vexation. What would he ascribe my blush to? What would be his contempt and annoyance if, in the momentary confusion and terror caused by his words and eyes, I had looked my secret? Had I done so? I hardly dared turn. I let fall my handkerchief as an excuse to confront him by degrees; and when I raised my head, I saw that his eyes were fixed on Laura.

"I will write this afternoon," he said, "and offer Lady Callender a welcome to Ashleigh Manor. Miss Malcolmson implies that our circle, though peaceful, is cheerless——"

"No," I interrupted, warmly, "not cheerless to me. I am perfectly happy. I think of others, sir."

"You are too considerate. Take my advice, and think only of yourself in this world. A cynical acquaintance of mine once said an odd thing—'Mr. Merton, life would be tolerable if it were not for our friends.' I think that an improvement on the old notion of life being endurable but for its pleasures. There are few people in this world who, in their hearts, do not like to be let alone. Sympathy is very oppressive. It must be so to a man of the world who knows, with that arch-misanthrope, Rochefoucauld, that there is *always* something in the misfortunes of our friends that does not displease us. Oh! I am cruel, I know, in choking the fountains of a young heart's sympathy with mud. Do you think I mean all that I say?"

"No."

"That No was full of emphasis. I like your sincerity. I envy your faith. The world is good, and true, and bright to you. May God preserve it so in your sight! Keep your creed intact. Don't let the world rob it of an article. Strive to think always of humanity in the aggregate, and never judge it by individuals. Faith can only respire in broad and deep views. The moment you engage it in single instances, it perishes.

Judge of the size, if you like, but not of the beauty of the statue by the foot. Many things are defective in particulars which are admirable in their entirety. There you have an antidote for the nauseous poison I just now administered.

"And there, sir, you talk from the heart."

"Believe it, an' you will," he said, wearily.

CHAPTER IX.

LADY CALLENDER AND HER DAUGHTER.

I WAS given to know, a few days after Mr. Merton had written to Lady Callender, that her ladyship and her daughter had accepted the invitation, and I was desired—as housekeeper—to prepare bedrooms for them, and to make the other necessary arrangements for their reception.

I had been housekeeper by this time long enough to see what my duties were, and what my qualifications for the position. The duties I had found almost nominal; and you may therefore conceive that I regarded myself qualified to discharge them. A better set of servants than those at Ashleigh Manor were never before assembled under one roof. Mr. Merton had charged them with loitering; but it had always seemed to me that if they had

all of them one virtue in perfection, it was alacrity. I was very thankful to find them so well disciplined. By taking pains not to appear too inquisitive in their doings, by never entering the kitchen without some excellent excuse, by always speaking gently to them, and by letting them see by my manner that I did not think a bit more of myself because Mr. Merton had honoured me with additional proofs of his esteem and confidence, I succeeded in earning their respect and liking, which saved me an infinity of trouble and anxiety, because they did their best to please me, and gave me no occasion whatever to find fault with them.

The day before the arrival of Lady Callender, I fancied that Mr. Merton seemed very restless. He was reserved in speech and uneasy in manner. I would catch him looking at me with a puzzling expression in his eyes, which left them if I prolonged the glance I returned. He was a shade paler than usual, and though without being in any degree irritable, gave me the notion of having been made thoroughly discontented.

In the afternoon, Laura having gone into the grounds to wait until I should get my hat and join her, I met Mr. Merton in the gallery.

"Miss Malcolmson," he said abruptly, "where were you last evening at half-past seven?"

I was surprised by the question; and after reflecting a few moments, answered that I was in the library with Laura.

He looked at me fixedly with sharp and piercing eyes; and then, as though satisfied with the expression on my face, said in a lighter voice,

"My reason for asking is this: I was in my dressing-room last evening at that hour, and I imagined I heard a sound as though some one was moving in the adjacent room, which has a door communicating with my dressing-room. As that chamber belongs to the old house, I wondered if any of the servants had taken the liberty to trespass again; and, determined to make an example of the man or woman I found there, I took a candle and entered the room. It was vacant. I walked on, but saw nobody. I have since ascertained that at that particular time the whole of the servants were in the kitchen, so I thought I would inquire if *you* had taken it into your head to carry out Mardon's theory, and attempt a search for Wakefield."

"Laura will tell you I was with her all the evening."

"Excuse me for asking the question. I only joke when I talk of your imitating Mardon. As housekeeper you might, I fancied, have taken it into your head to see after the other part of the house as well as this."

"I should not dream of disobeying your orders."

"No, that would not be right, for you would be establishing a plea for the servants. But what is really on my mind—I seem to have no secrets from you, Miss Malcolmson—is the coming of our guests to-morrow. We have lived such wonderfully quiet lives lately that this visit partakes of the character of an irruption. But I have invited them for Laura's sake. I often fear that my darling is dull, yet I have not the heart to collect my acquaintances about me again."

"I think you should, sir; not for Laura's sake, but for your own."

"You fancy I am dull?"

"I am afraid you are sometimes dull, and sad too."

"Do you ever speculate upon me?"

"Sometimes."

"I should like to hear the nature of your speculations."

I was silent.

"You say," he continued, "that you think me dull and sad. *I* do not say that I am. Melancholy may be an idiosyncrasy. But since you presume me to be dull and sad, tell me what you believe makes me so."

"I hardly like to be so personal as my answers to your questions would make me."

"Well, personalities are never in good taste, are they? I am afraid that I err often and grievously in this particular; but freedom and familiarity are nearly identical. People thrown so much together as Laura and you and I are, can hardly help taking the sort of interest in each other which pops out in blunt questions. However, I'll not be so much of an egotist as to desire you to answer my question; only don't think me dull and sad—I am neither. The loss of society is no privation to me, or you may depend that I would not debar myself from the enjoyment. You and Laura and my books, and the pleasure I take in my house and grounds, satisfy my small craving for diversion. You may believe what I tell you. Atrabilious faces often mask healthy and

cheerful minds. The liveliest fellow I ever knew had the most saturnine countenance you can conceive—yellow, lank, monastic, with small lack-lustre eyes, and straight black hair brushed tightly across a forehead coloured like a guinea. Yet the very spirit of Comus held its revelries in that fellow's mind. He was as droll and diverting as Yorick, though with a face as ugly as Yorick's skull."

And nodding to me with a smile he passed on his way downstairs.

His language did not in the slightest degree persuade me that he was not dull and sad; nor would I even accept his melancholy face as a criterion of his spirits, for I believed that he was duller and sadder at heart than his countenance expressed him. I thought a little over his questioning me about the old house, and concluded that Mardon's disobedience had affected him so powerfully, that he was resolved to punish with the penalty of instant dismissal the servant who should again dare to defy his wishes.

Next morning expectation stood on tiptoe at Ashleigh Manor. Lady Callender and her daughter were to arrive at twelve o'clock. I awaited their advent with curiosity. To give you the truth, happy as I was, I still felt that

life at Ashleigh Manor might be improved by the fillip of novelty which the arrival of the guest would give it. May had now come with its lovely tints and its sweet perfumes. The grounds were beautiful with the snow-blossoms of the apple trees and the clustering lilacs. The shoots were bursting everywhere into leaves, and the buds hung heavy and full and ready to melt under the magic wand of June into richest hues. Sweet was the softly-rushing air that came in through the open windows of the drawing-room, metallic with the innumerous hum of insects, busy with the cawing of the crows flapping their ebon wings among the high branches, and fragrant with the odour of rich mould and violet, tempered with the salt breath of the sea. I stood upon the lawn, and looked up at the noble picturesque house, and longed for the artist's gift, to reproduce on canvas the stately pile, with its windows sparkling in the clear morning light, and its walls made tender by the hundred mellow tints of time.

I had despatched the carriage to meet the travellers who had come by coach from London, doubtless preferring the slow but safer mode of journeying to the postchaise, which offered a more tempting and more unresisting

object of attack to the highwaymen, who still plied their now obsolete occupation along the main roads.

Mr. Merton joined me in the drawing-room a few minutes before the carriage drove up; and when the sounds of wheels were audible in the avenue, he went to the hall door to receive his guests.

I saw them alight: a stout, matronly lady, and a young girl, both veiled, but both stylishly dressed. They entered the drawing-room escorted by Mr. Merton, and Laura and I were introduced. They threw up their veils to kiss Laura, and then I had a view of their faces.

I cannot say that I was favourably impressed by Lady Callender. She had a face well filled out, but very sallow; her eyes were small, her mouth wide. She had great earrings in her ears of Indian workmanship, an immense brooch containing a miniature portrait; her gown was of blue satin, her shawl a Cashmere; on her head was one of the coal-scuttle bonnets then in vogue. Yet in spite of her costume and face there was something about her that at once assured you she was a lady.

Her daughter, on the other hand, was a

really elegant girl; not too tall, but slender and singularly graceful in her movements. I do not think that she would have been universally thought beautiful; but she was beautiful to my taste. Her one need, perhaps, was a greater purity of complexion; for, though she was very fair, she had not that charming whiteness of skin which is the great point of beauty among English girls. Her eyes were fine and blue, a deep blue which her amber-coloured hair made almost black. Her eye-brows, though light, were well-defined, and so arched that the mood she was in would either make the expression they gave to the upper part of her face supercilious or piquant with a pretty air of surprise. Her mouth was small, her lips well carved and firm; her ears delicate, her neck and throat very fair and charmingly outlined. All catalogues of a woman's charms must necessarily be imperfect; however, I only pretend to write down as best I can the first impressions her appearance made on me. By-and-by I shall hope to make her character give colour to my outline.

Mr. Merton met them with great politeness, but with a certain coldness that did not escape me who knew him so well; though it

would not be so obvious as to be discernible to those he greeted. I attributed his manner to the rather persistent way in which Lady Callender condoled with him on the loss of his wife. Her condolences were not, indeed, downright, but sufficiently implied to make him draw in. No doubt the position her ladyship occupied was an embarrassing one. She could not revert to the murder for fear of paining him and Laura, and she could not be silent on his loss for fear that she should be thought insensible.

I saw Miss Callender studying me quietly while her mother and Mr. Merton conversed. I had been introduced to her simply as Miss Malcolmson, and no doubt she was wondering who I was. Presently Mr. Merton asked me very politely to conduct the ladies to their bedrooms.

It was no doubt in order to ascertain my position at Ashleigh Manor that Miss Callender asked me, very pleasantly, after I had conducted her to her bedroom, to remain with her. The rooms I had prepared for them were those over the drawing-room; they were divided by folding doors. Miss Callender had that nearest the gallery; her ladyship the room overlooking the grounds.

"My maid had to stop behind to bring a box I had forgotten," said Miss Callender, removing her bonnet and looking alternately from me to the looking-glass. "She won't arrive here until to-morrow."

I asked if I should ring for one of the servants to attend her; but she said that she would do very well by herself if I would not mind presently pinning her collar on. She then began, but rather cautiously, to sound me on the subject of the murder.

"Did you know Mrs. Merton?"

"Oh yes."

"Are you," she asked, smiling very pleasantly, and exhibiting a row of pearly teeth, "are you a relative of poor Mrs. Merton?"

"No; I am the governess."

"Oh, the governess!" she exclaimed, looking quite relieved, and feeling, I dare say, that her superior position privileged her to pump me dry.

"Do you teach Laura?"

"Yes. Laura is Mr. Merton's only child."

"Of course—I should have remembered. What a pretty little child it is! Then if you knew Mrs. Merton, you were here when the murder was committed?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you awfully frightened?"

"It was a fearful shock to everybody in the house. The tragedy was heightened by the fact of the girl who committed the murder being quite young, and certainly the very last person in the world one would have thought likely to do such a dreadful thing."

"Has she not been caught?"

"No. I don't think she ever will be. Mr. Merton believes that she has committed suicide. At least, when I say he believes this, I mean that we both fancied the memory of her crime would drive her mad, and that she would kill herself. She seemed a gentle creature."

"What made her murder Mrs. Merton?"

"It is supposed that she murdered her in a fit of passion," I answered, not choosing to acquaint the imaginative young lady with Mrs. Merton's real character.

"Was Mr. Merton dreadfully shocked?"

"It was a terrible blow."

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, taking up a brush; "I hope nobody will murder me. The girl—what was her name?"

"Wakefield—Jane Wakefield."

"She was Mrs. Merton's lady's-maid, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"I declare," she said with a shudder, "that hearing of such awful things makes one afraid to keep a girl about one. Where was Mrs. Merton murdered? Not in this room, I hope?" looking around her.

"No. Her bedroom was the centre one in the gallery. The door is kept locked; it has been kept locked since the murder."

"Oh, how dreadful! And what a gloomy old house this looks outside! I shall have mamma to sleep with me. What strange walls those are! Are there any secret doors in those panels?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'm a dreadful coward. I believe in ghosts. I believe in everything nearly. When I read 'The Mysteries of Udolpho,' I hadn't courage enough to go to bed alone and in the dark for a whole month afterwards. This house seems quite as dismal as the Castle of Udolpho. Is Mr. Merton a brave man? Are there many men-servants kept?"

"I don't think you have anything to fear, Miss Callender," I answered, smiling, though not without a suspicion that there was a little affectation in her gushing apprehensions. "You might feel nervous, perhaps, if your bedroom were in what we call the old house

—that is, the central portion of Ashleigh Manor—which is full of ancient rooms and ghastly corridors."

"Does anybody sleep there?"

"Not now. Mr. Merton has locked the rooms up, and forbidden anybody to enter them."

"Why? why?" she asked, eagerly.

"There is no mystery," I replied, laughing. "The servants used to get together there, under pretence of answering the old house bell, and cause Mr. Merton great inconvenience by their delays."

"Is it a very wonderful place, the old house?"

"Wonderful for its austerity, blackness, and dampness. There are some comfortable rooms in it though. I occupied two very pleasant apartments in the upper part of it when I first came here."

"Weren't you terribly frightened when the night came?"

"No. There was nothing to frighten me. To be sure there was a ghost that was supposed to walk in the basement. But its movements were limited and I did not fear its intrusion."

Just then the folding-doors opened, and forth stepped Lady Callender.

"Miss Malcolmson is little Laura Merton's governess, mamma," exclaimed Miss Callender, "and she has been telling me dreadful stories of this house."

"Really!" responded her ladyship, staring at me with uplifted brows.

"I told you," said I, "that a ghost was supposed to haunt the lower part of the old house. Mr. Merton first told me of it. But nobody but the servants believe in its existence."

"Pshaw! ghosts!" exclaimed Lady Callender, contemptuously.

"And then the dreadful murder, mamma."

"I am sorry you should have discussed these subjects with my daughter," said her ladyship to me; "Miss Callender is very nervous ....."

"Oh, Miss Malcolmson says that there are a number of men-servants kept; so I shan't be afraid with you in the next room."

I did not remember telling her that there was a number of men-servants kept; but if it comforted her to think so, I would not disturb her belief. I thought, however, that Lady Callender might have rebuked me for my presumed indiscretion with a little less asperity.

I held the door open for them to pass out

and followed them downstairs to the drawing-room. Mr. Merton was there with Laura. Her ladyship immediately went to him, seated herself by his side, and engaged him in a close conversation. Miss Callender took Laura on her knee and began to talk to her. I hardly knew whether to remain or withdraw. Conceiving that Mr. Merton might think my place was with Laura, I seated myself at a respectful distance from them, and under cover of a volume studied the guests.

Lady Callender amused me. She alternated between the sombre and the sunny with diverting regularity. One moment she was all nods and becks and wreathed smiles; the next her face was as mournful as a mute's. I could hear her talking of India and her husband; of Mrs. Merton's death, and Mr. Merton's paleness. By *his* fixed gaze, his occasional smile, and his appearance of polite attention, I daresay she thought he was much pleased with her conversation; but I saw that if he heard two out of every twenty words she uttered it was about as much as he did hear. When her ladyship's volubility slackened, she amused the interval by gazing round the room. No doubt she was greatly struck by the splendour of the apartment. The mid-day sun was

shining brilliantly in through the windows, making the spacious room lustrous with the beams reverberated by the silver and crystal and gilt which were plentifully, though unostentatiously, distributed. From time to time her eye reverted to the face of Mr. Merton and thence glanced off to her daughter, in whose high-piled, amber-bright hair a sunbeam was entangled, and there it lay veining the ample tresses with gold. Miss Callender bent gracefully over the sweet-faced child, who seemed to listen with pretty, unaffected interest to her companion's low-toned words. The group was charming. No laboured ingenuity could have devised a more delightful and winning *pose* than that which Miss Callender all unconsciously held. Both she and Laura were very fair. The sunbeam that nestled in the hair of the one found a gay reflection in the large innocent eyes of the other. Mr. Merton did not appear to notice them for some time; but looking at him presently I saw that he was watching them.

What was there in his gaze to drive the blood out of my cheek and make my heart beat languidly with a sudden sense of utter isolation? Never since his wife's death had I seen this man whom I loved so passionately in the

presence of a young and beautiful woman. Never, therefore, until now, had I clearly realised the wide and deep interval that separated him from me.

Oh! the stinging shame that bit my heart as I reflected on my audacity in daring to love him even in secret. Now could I with that young, well-born, handsome girl before me, feel how much I was the mere pauper, the mere dependant, the obscure and friendless creature whose destiny was servitude, whose daily toil was to supply her daily wants, who was removed only from a servant's lot by her pretensions to better fortune, by her claims upon the courtesy of the world as a poor lady.

Love in this life has bitter revelations made it. It is bitter to discover that the love we believed to have been inspired by ourselves is the inspiration of our wealth; to witness the decay of love in one whose love we thought abiding; to learn that the caresses and smiles which taught us to love were but the mask of a passion felt for another. But more bitter than all is to love one whom wealth and position sunder from us as completely as if the grave intervened.

And what sent these thoughts into my head on a sudden? Was it jealousy?

I fear it was. Jealousy without the pride that supports it; jealousy gleaming like a light over the blank abyss that divided me from the man I loved, and showing me its depths.

Had I asked myself the reason of my jealousy what should I have answered? Unhappily that jealousy is most bitter which is most unfounded. Sophistry may find a hundred causes for the emotion; but logic can do nothing for it. Why was I jealous? I asked. This man does not know that I love him. And what was there in that semi-speculative gaze he fastened upon Miss Callender to make me jealous? He might be thinking of his child; he might be thinking of the sorrow that caused his melancholy; he might be thinking of a hundred things having no faintest reference to *her*. I might have answered: I am made to feel—I know not why nor how—but I am made to feel that my love is hopeless; my heart is miserable with a sense of abasement; Miss Callender has illustrated an interval between my love and me of a depth and breadth I knew not of, I thought not of, until now. And I am jealous too, and my jealousy deepens my hopelessness.

Excellent reasoning, giving no motives, but recapitulating facts! But had it found me

motives it would have furnished me with no consolation. I only knew that I had been made jealous, and there was an end.

It was now past one, and a footman entered to announce that luncheon was ready. Lady Callender glanced at me as I took my seat at the table; I think she was surprised to find me on so familiar a footing in the house. But this may have been my sensitiveness.

At the first setting out Miss Callender adopted a rather subdued tone; but her spirits broke out presently, and she began to talk briskly. My experience of my own sex was exceedingly narrow, and I had no knowledge whatever of those amusive arts which lively ladies of every age are wont to practise at the expense of their natural enemy Man. But I suppose my jealousy stood me in stead of experience; for it seemed to me that already, at this very early stage of their acquaintance, Miss Callender was deliberately setting her cap at the wealthy widower. She talked, she laughed, she told in a very piquant way, odd little stories of Indian society, drew with her tongue diverting caricatures of the awkward or handsome, or dull or intelligent gentlemen it had been her good or bad fortune to meet; made her mother red-faced with merriment over a

ludicrous account of an alarm of fire that had been raised on board the East-Indiaman in which they had sailed to England; and drew honest laughter from us all by her vivacious description of an old uncle at whose house they had been staying whilst in London.

Yet, notwithstanding her sprightliness, she was uniformly well-bred in all she said and did; her laugh was frank and melodious; and you would have thought her the most unaffected creature in the world, had you only listened to her with your eyes shut. But it was impossible to watch her and not see that her frankness was trained, her simplicity disciplined; in other words, that her manner was very good art, that owed nothing to nature but its dress.

She piqued my curiosity. Her admirably-wrought exterior put me almost in a good temper with her. I will not say that she was out of my experience, for my experience was so small that there was very little indeed in it; but she was removed from any conception I could have formed had the word Coquette been given to my imagination to embody in language.

All the time I was wondering what sort of opinion Mr. Merton would form of her,

whether it would coincide with mine, or whether he would like her.

I watched them both as closely as I dared. I saw her cast side-long glances at him out of her fine eyes, glances of which I would have at once allowed the witchery had I not, with a woman's acuteness, guessed at the long practice she had gone through before she could take aim, and discharge her blue lightning with such happy audacity of seeming innocence. He showed a rather stubborn front at first to her sallies; smiled slowly and constrainedly at her lively humours, obviously more from politeness than mirth; and looked at her but seldom. But by degrees he grew more interested, his smiles more frequent, and before lunch was over had fenced with her, and repaid her strokes of wit with answers which at least served the rather easily-effected purpose of making her ladyship very merry.

I thought to myself, this girl is doing in an hour what I have never succeeded in doing since Mrs. Merton's death, ardently as I had longed for the power to work the miracle. She was chasing his sorrow, and making him brighten up that weapon of wit and cynicism which he had sheathed in melancholy. He

could not fail to be obliged to her for doing this; and the sense of obligation would breed a tender feeling. He would contrast this airy, merry, beautiful girl, this frank, genial, rompish creature with her eyes of blue and hair of amber, with his sallow, desperate-tempered wife; and memory would furnish a deeper significance to the charms with which this victorious Miss Constance had taken our dull, calm circle by storm.

Such whiffs of a world of which I was as ignorant as I was of the moon, as this girl brought with her! glimpses of Indian life, of duels, flirtations, theatricals, of men black as ebony and women coloured like cream, of diamonds, and turbans, and shawls, of European insolence and Indian servility. And how her ladyship listened, and nodded, and laughed, and looked grave; putting in here and there a pat sentence, not to exhibit her own talent, but to give new points to her daughter's smart sentences! Laura laughed and wondered and wondered and laughed; and I wondered too, more than Laura, though she had the advantage over me in laughing. We had never made so long a meal of dinner as we made of that lunch. And before we rose from the table Miss Callender was as

much at home at Ashleigh Manor as if she had lived in it all her life.

As we entered the hall Laura slipped her hand into mine, and asked me to take her for a walk. I inquired if she would not rather stay with Miss Callender? She answered, No! no! impetuously, and begged me to take her on the sands. I went to Mr. Merton, and asked him if he would allow Laura and me to go for a walk.

"Don't you like our guests?" he said, with a glance at the two ladies, who were admiring the plants in the conservatory.

"Yes, sir; but Laura desired me to take her out, and I wished to get your consent before doing so, lest you might wish us to remain with Lady Callender and her daughter."

"Oh, I mean to chaperon them. Laura sticks to the old, I see. Children are always loyal. Go by all means."

And he entered the conservatory.

CHAPTER X.

MR. MERTON SHOWS US OVER THE OLD HOUSE.

I DID not meet the ladies again until we had assembled in the drawing-room before dinner. I found both her ladyship and Miss Callender in high spirits, the latter rattling away to Mr. Merton, who was seated near her, and who looked, I thought, tired and dejected, and—my feelings made me hope—bored.

Lady Callender examined me as I entered leading Laura by the hand, with a fine air of curiosity, as if we had not met before. Her daughter glanced at me, and seeing Laura, gave a theatrical start, and ran forward to greet and kiss her, took her upon her knee, and talked to Mr. Merton over his child's shoulder. So here we all were again pretty much as we had been before lunch. Laura did not seem quite at her ease on Miss Cal-

lender's knee, and presently slipped away and came over to me. Miss Callender smoothed her dress and chatted on gaily.

Her ladyship condescended to converse with me a little; told me how greatly she admired the grounds and the house; how different the vegetation was in India from what it was in Europe; how there had been a time when she looked forward to winter as the season of health and mirth, but how her long residence in India had made her now dread it.

But although she talked tolerably freely, she never seemed to lose sight of her daughter. Even when she was actually addressing me, I could see her smiling in sympathy with something Miss Callender was saying. I rather esteemed the old lady for not making a fuss over Laura, and parading an artificial love of children. In truth she was almost old enough to be simple. Years certainly have the knack of making people candid. No man or woman can be altogether a humbug to the last. Nature *will* break here and there through the masquerade dress, made threadbare by time. Life takes us round a circle, starting us from simplicity, and bringing us back to it again as bald and helpless as it found us.

Miss Callender was quite as lively at dinner as she had been at lunch. But I fancied that there was a shade more of *directness* in manner towards Mr. Merton than there had been before. If it be a compliment to a host to appear perfectly at home in his house, unquestionably Miss Callender paid that compliment to Mr. Merton. But always, let me repeat, that her air of familiarity was redeemed, or rather decorated, by a quality of good breeding. She was undeniably a lady; but bred in a school of society where conventionalities are somewhat despised—a society that exists in a climate too feverish to the blood and spirits to make the buckram etiquette of old-world life endurable.

"Miss Malcolmson will bear me out that I have altogether eschewed society," I heard Mr. Merton say during the course of the dinner, either to Miss Callender or her mother. Both ladies looked at me. "Is it not so, Miss Malcolmson?"

I would not appear to have overheard what he said, and made him repeat his remark.

"It is so, indeed, sir," I answered.

My calling him "sir," seemed to strike Miss Callender, for she glanced at her mother with

a smile. But no doubt Lady Callender considered my respectfulness proper.

"But you have eschewed society merely for a time, Mr. Merton," said Miss Callender. "You are now in the chrysalis state: by-and-by you will be fanning your brilliant wings in the sunshine."

"Oh, the dust that made my wings brilliant has been rubbed off. I am now in what you would probably call the cork state; pinned down by taste on the cork of seclusion, a pleasing spectacle for my own complacency, and perhaps an inviting object for my intimate friends' gossip."

"But society will never be able to do without you!" exclaimed Lady Callender, with a sultry smile. "You will not be able to resist the entreaties of your friends."

"I must try," he answered. "Meanwhile, I fear that you will find your stay dull here. Miss Callender, I am sure, will miss the brilliant life she has been used to in India."

"Indeed I will not, Mr. Merton. One soon grows weary of military society. The men's minds resemble each other as closely as their uniforms. I like civilians. I prefer black coats to red."

"You are singular in your taste. Most ladies are for the red coats."

"There is a great sameness—a great sameness among officers, Mr. Merton," remarked her ladyship. "Poor Sir William was indeed an exception. He loved books and art, and shone in a conversazione with the most learned of the company. But even *his* conversation was always filled with professional allusions."

"You will find this failing among the black coats quite as strongly pronounced. The banker will talk of cheques, and the broker of stocks, the man of letters of books, the doctor of his patients, the lawyer of his suits."

"Oh, Mr. Merton, no gentleman is ever shoppish," exclaimed Miss Callender.

"But how can a man help talking of the subject that occupies his thoughts night and day? Would you call a lover shoppish for talking of his love?"

"I should call him foolish," replied Miss Callender, with a merry laugh.

"Why foolish, Conny?" asked her ladyship; "would it not be natural?"

"Oh, we oughtn't to be natural, ought we, Mr. Merton? What is the use of our being civilized if we are to be natural?"

"You are a true cynic, Miss Callender," said he.

"Indeed I am not," she answered, highly pleased; "but I should say you are."

"I am afraid I am, not because I do not, but because I do believe in honour and love and beauty and nature. Have you that faith?"

"I believe only in what I see."

"Oh, a materialist."

"If you like. You talk of abstractions when you speak of honour and nature and beauty and so forth."

"How? Are you an abstraction? If so, then beauty for an abstraction has a wonderful individuality."

Now let us all laugh. Now let us all look pleased. Never did anybody look so delighted as Lady Callender at this compliment. A smile broke out and lasted some minutes beyond the prescribed limits of the recognition of a compliment by the face. Miss Callender hid her satisfaction under a coquettish humility of countenance.

"By the way, Miss Malcolmson," exclaimed Mr. Merton, startling me out of a very painful reverie, "Miss Callender told me that you have been frightening her with

an account of the ghosts that walk Ashleigh Manor."

"I mentioned the story of Maud Assheton's ghost, which you told me," I answered: "but I am not aware that I spoke of any other ghost."

"Is the house really haunted?" asked Miss Callender, making up a pair of large innocent eyes.

"Miss Malcolmson will answer you," replied Mr. Merton, with the faintest shadow of a frown darkening his forehead.

"Miss Malcolmson has told me all she knows. It is very dreadful. I shall never be able to sleep, Mr. Merton."

"Nonsense, Conny!" exclaimed her ladyship. "I am next door."

"But if the ghost should appear, what good could you do, mamma? You know that you are fearfully nervous."

"I have an old volume in my library," said Mr. Merton, "filled with formulas for the exorcising of evil spirits, and the frightening away of spectres. I shall be happy to have the book placed in your room."

"No—but really—are you in earnest? is there a ghost?"

"Are *you* in earnest, Miss Callender? Are you really afraid of ghosts?"

"I never saw one," she said, rather simperingly; "but if I did, it would be the last that would be likely to appear to me, for I should die of fright."

"I have lived in this house forty years," remarked Mr. Merton, "and have never yet seen a ghost. If you choose to accept the unsupported testimony of an ignorant and cowardly footman," he continued with a sidelong glance at me, "you can believe that a ghost haunts a certain portion of the old house."

"I should like to see the old house," exclaimed Lady Callender, who was evidently incredulous and tired of the subject.

"I shall be happy to show you over it after dinner if you like," he answered. "But I think the morning will be the best time. The rooms will be dark now; and though every one of us should carry a candle, the illumination would not be sufficiently strong to illustrate all the grimness of those ancestral chambers. Besides," he continued with a hard laugh, "as the cocks have gone to roost the ghost might take it into her head to come forth."

"I shouldn't be frightened if others were with me," said Miss Callender.

"We had better wait until the morning," he replied. "That will give you time to screw your nerves up to the sticking-point."

"You think me a great coward, Mr. Merton; but I cannot help being timid."

"Indeed timidity is a charming feature in a woman's character. I dislike what are called plucky women. True women are always cowards."

"I was always a coward," said Lady Callender.

"Don't you except married women, Mr. Merton?" asked Miss Callender.

"How?"

"Don't you think that the woman who has spirit enough to marry ought not to be charged with cowardice?"

"Oh, Miss Callender, hide that satyr's foot! Here is a young lady," indicating me, "whom your views may corrupt; and how do you know but that some young gentleman will hold you responsible for his despair?"

I was not very well pleased by his reference to me on such a topic before people who obviously eyed me from so remote a distance as the Callenders did. Fortunately the subject was dropped, and very shortly after we withdrew to the drawing-room.

As you may suppose, Miss Callender played and sang well. There are certain qualifications which seem to go hand in hand: a rattle of a tongue, for instance, and a voice for the piano. You seldom meet with shy, calm, reserved girls who play or care about playing, even if they are fond of music. On the other hand you will find most of the amateur-pianistes you know sharp, talkative women, imaginative, vivacious and noisy. Before tea was brought in Mr. Merton asked Miss Callender if she played. Of course she did. I could have told him that; and I fancy I could have hit upon the sort of songs she sang and liked. Her ladyship took the answer out of her daughter's mouth by assuring Mr. Merton that Conny played beautifully, "and she sings too," added she with a knowing look. Miss Callender coquetted a little with Mr. Merton's request at first, declared that her voice had been spoiled by the English climate, and made excuses enough to let us know that she meant to play. Mr. Merton took out a portfolio of music, but the young lady said she had some songs by heart and would sing them—since he was so very pressing. She sang two pieces; one I judged to have a comic vein running through it from the pleased smile with which

her ladyship listened, though I protest I did not catch a single syllable; the other was a very namby-pamby ballad which she delivered very gushingly, resting upon the final syllables and ending with a long-drawn trill. I was not sorry when a mighty thump with both hands terminated the performance. I think she would have made a tolerable singer had she sung with less self-consciousness. She had a pleasing, tuneful voice; but she strained it in the effort to infuse more sentiment into it than it would hold.

Yet Mr. Merton seemed highly charmed. He applauded her with a warmth that certainly struck me as being sincere; and entered into a conversation with her and her mother with more light-heartedness in his tone and in the expression of his face than he had exhibited for many a long day.

The guests retired early that night, professing to feel fatigued after their journey. Before bidding Mr. Merton good night Miss Callender expressed a hundred prettily-turned fears of the ghosts, and begged him to hold himself in readiness to rush to the rescue should he hear a thrilling scream resound through the gallery.

"You may depend," he answered laughing,

"that I shall hasten to your assistance at the first alarm you give, armed with such spiritual weapons wherewith to battle with the spectre, as I can lay my hands on."

"But what do you call a spiritual weapon?" asked she, making up her innocent eyes again and dressing her face with a lively air of simplicity.

"When old Martin Luther used to be intruded upon by the Devil," he replied, "his habit was to fling a Bible at the fiend's head, which at once drove him out of the room. I would not act so profanely as to treat your ghost to such a missile; but I have a very large quarto volume of sermons which, if flung at the ghost's head, would as certainly put it to flight as a fragment of its contents read aloud would put a congregation to sleep. That shall be my spiritual weapon. Then we have my book of formulas. And if these should fail, why we can but take to our heels."

And so with a laugh and a soft good night from Miss Callender, and a voluminous smile and a train of gracious nods from her ladyship, the guests went to their bedrooms. I accompanied them to see that they were made comfortable, and then returned to the drawing-room to look after the house as was now my

duty. I found Mr. Merton pacing to and fro, his hands clasped behind him, his face pale and gloomy. The light that had been in his eyes, the faint flush that had tinted his cheeks almost into the semblance of health, had died out. He looked white, passionless, melancholy, more so even than he was accustomed to appear; though this might have been the effect of contrast. When he saw me he said,

"What made you fill Miss Callender's head with all this nonsense about ghosts?"

"It was her own fault," I replied, piqued by his asperity and by the sense of being unjustly charged; "she plied me with questions which I was bound to answer."

"Did she ask you about the murder?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you tell her?"

I repeated the conversation I had had with her as nearly as I could remember.

"I beg," he said, "that for the future you will exercise all your discretion in answering any questions respecting the murder of my wife. The diabolical deed that was done under my roof has outlawed me from society; my exile is of my own imposing; but the effect, as it concerns me, is still the same. You must observe that I show a disposition, by

welcoming these ladies to my house, to break from the recluse life my sensitiveness has enjoined. Why do you chill me back again into solitude by discussing with my guests the deed which it is my hope to see fade out of the minds of my friends?"

"Sir," I stammered. "I ——."

"Well," he said in a softened voice, "I have no right to speak with warmth. Doubtless, Miss Callender provoked you into answering her. However, for my sake, I am sure you will carefully avoid talking on the subject for the future, no matter with whom. The gloom which this crime has overshadowed my home with may be made a blight and a curse by prolonging its presence. Help me by your silence to cause it to vanish."

He began to walk to and fro again, and wishing him good night I went away, feeling more miserable than it is in my power to describe.

It was to be presumed that Miss Callender saw no ghost that night; for no cry was heard. The girl's fears made her ladyship very jocose next morning when we met at breakfast. Thanks to feelings and thoughts which I should only weary you by describing, I had passed a bad night; and in consequence my

face was pale and my eyes still sore with the abundant foolish tears I had wept. Nobody but Laura seemed to take notice of my appearance; and the first reply that occurred to me had appeased her curiosity. Not once did I catch Mr. Merton's eye, though this was owing to my having hung my head and kept my gaze bent downwards for most of the time. In truth I was afraid that Miss Callender might make some remark on my paleness; and this fear had been so great that it had almost prevented me from joining the party at breakfast. However, she was too busy chattering her idle words to heed me; and her ladyship's attention was well employed in playing chorus to her daughter's airy performance.

Miss Callender informed Mr. Merton that having passed through one night in safety she believed now that she would no longer dread going to bed; an assurance which seemed to give Mr. Merton much satisfaction, to judge from the smile with which he received it.

"Remember," she presently said, "we are to see the old part of the house this morning."

"I remember," answered Mr. Merton; "but do you think your nerves are sufficiently recovered from the shock caused by your fear

of last night to enable you to invade the very haunts of the ghost?"

"You will protect me if it appears, Mr. Merton?"

"Nay," he answered gallantly; "it is more likely that you will protect me, for all ghosts are said to respect innocence and beauty."

She blushed with a rosy smile, glanced at him, and let her eyes fall. There was a significance in the short pause that followed that might have been made dramatic had not Lady Callender spoiled it.

"What delicious butter," said she, "you get in the country, Mr. Merton."

After which the conversation became general and commonplace until the meal was over.

I withdrew with Laura to the library, glad to be alone, and to have no one to remark my pale face and heavy eyes but my sweet, uninquisitive little pupil. I hoped that Mr. Merton would know I was with Laura at her lessons, and that he would not allow the ladies to intrude upon us. To my annoyance the door presently opened, and in he walked. I looked to see if the others followed, but he was alone. He went to the window and called to me.

"Miss Malcolmson, can I have a word with you?"

I approached him.

"What is the matter?" he asked in a low tone.

"Do you mean what is the matter with me, sir?"

"Of course. What else?"

"Nothing."

"You are pale, and you look as if you had been crying."

I made no answer.

"Were you vexed by what I said last night?"

"I thought that you spoke a little harshly, sir."

"You still *sir* me in spite of my request that you should not. You are rather stubborn, I fear."

"I think not, sir."

"You speak with a coldness which your face belies. *You think not, sir.* Come, now, be frank; you can be—indeed, you always have been. Did you cry after you left me last night?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I felt unhappy."

"Did I make you unhappy?"

"Yes."

"You must have cried late into the night, for the traces of tears are still visible. How hard it is that I should make you unhappy, when my greatest pleasure would be to make you happy. Well, some persons have the unfortunate knack of always getting into the light; of standing between the sun and those on whom they wish the sun to shine. I am one of those unfortunates, or you certainly would not be looking dejected through me, who in my heart wish Laura's friend well. I expected your sad looks were due to my words last night, and have come here to make my peace. Forgive me, Miss Malcolmson."

I answered impulsively, with the tears paining my eyes, and my love throbbing passionately in my heart,

"I would rather die, sir, than incur your anger."

"You shall not die and you shall not incur my anger," he exclaimed, smiling. "Come, I have your forgiveness, and we will be sad no longer. I want you to join me in showing my guests over the old house."

"I have Laura's lessons," I began.

"Oh, Laura can play here until we return,"

he interrupted. "We can kill two birds with one stone. While we gratify our friends' curiosity we can peer about for some relic of Wakefield."

"That is a reproach, sir."

"It is not meant for one. It is true I searched the old part of the house carefully, but I may not have made the strict examination which would be necessary and possible in cold blood; for my companions and myself were agitated. At all events I want you to join us. So come, for the ladies are waiting."

I concluded that he had some reason in desiring my company, and without more ado I told Laura that I would return presently, and followed him to the drawing-room.

"Shall we want torches?" asked Miss Callender.

"Oh, dear, no! there will be enough sunshine in the rooms to see by," answered Mr. Merton.

"I am sorry," said the young lady. "Things look so picturesque by torchlight."

"And so they do by sunlight," put in my lady. "For my part I am not fond of lurid effects."

"Oh, you are not romantic, mamma. I

like the wild and terrible. I like Mrs. Radcliffe's novels, and "Macbeth," particularly the witches' scene, and the "Castle Spectre," and "Alphonso, King of Castile."* I always fall in love with those scowling bandits in broad-brimmed hats, who stand with their arms tightly folded across their chests, their brows knitted, their eyes gleaming with a kind of red fire, and their black mustachios curled up their cheeks, like they used to wear them in the days of Charles I."

"Really, Miss Callender, you will oblige me to cultivate a ferocious aspect, if you continue so warm in your admiration of that sort of thing," said Mr. Merton. "Perhaps, Lady Callender, you can give me a receipt for knitted brows and a flowing mustache."

* These two plays are by Matthew Lewis, a prodigious favourite in my younger days. A critic, writing of "Alphonso," says: "This tragedy delights in explosions. Alphonso's empire is destroyed by a blast of gunpowder, and restored by a clap of thunder. After the death of Cesario, and a short exhortation to that purpose by Orsino, all the conspirators fall down in a thunderclap, ask pardon of the King, and are forgiven." Miss Callender's taste was quite in keeping with that of her contemporaries; and should the reader feel tempted to laugh at her for it, let him ask himself how *his* taste may be judged fifty years hence, when some witty reviewer shall discourse on the character of the plays and novels which delight the present generation.

"Keep as you are, Mr. Merton," responded her ladyship with a gracious nod, which was intended, no doubt, to signify more than met the ear.

"Shall we start now?" he exclaimed, with a quick glance and a half smile at me.

We entered the hall, and Mr. Merton unlocked the door at the extremity. We passed through the room, Lady Callender gazing around her complacently, Miss Callender with a sober face of curiosity. We walked through the various chambers, the ladies uttering little exclamations of surprise as door after door was opened and new rooms discovered. Mr. Merton entertained them with a running commentary on the rooms as we traversed them. Whether the histories he ran through so glibly were as veracious as history usually is, or whether they were entirely due to his imagination, I cannot say; they at least served the purpose of amusing his audience. He talked so incessantly that I might have believed he was eager to overwhelm, by the rapidity of alien thoughts, some deep and painful feeling or recollection inspired by the scenes we were among, had I not known the strange pleasure he found in suffering his imagination to run

wild, and wanton under any topic sombre enough to be congenial to him.

Often as I had passed through these apartments to and fro between the Red Room and the drawing-room, they were made entirely novel to me by the sunless interest with which the gloomy legends he recited with dramatic power peopled them. The past lived again under the magic fluency of his language. A train of sullen shadows accompanied us, and I seemed to find myself elbowing the ghosts of the ladies and gentlemen who loved, and sung, and wept, and made merry, and died in these now deserted chambers. From the deep shadows in the corners, and from over the edges of their thick and dust-covered cobwebs, the black and motionless spiders surveyed us as we passed, aghast, perhaps, at this new invasion of their dominions, which Mr. Merton had led them to suppose were now wholly theirs. Now and then a mouse would scamper with terrified whirls across the floor, causing Lady Callender to shriek and pull her petticoats high above her stout ankles.

Miss Callender kept close to Mr. Merton, listening to him in silence, and not even smiling at the humour which in the broad

daylight she would have found diverting enough, and greeted with laughter and spruce repartee.

Presently we entered the Angels' Court. Here I conceived Mr. Merton would make a long pause, for the memory this austere place held was deeply tinged with the hue of romance, and I expected to be gratified again by a powerful and dramatic rendering of the legend of Maud Assheton's murder.

I was disappointed, however, to see Mr. Merton walk hastily across the gallery, looking behind as if inviting us to follow him with equal celerity. Thinking that he had forgotten the particular story connected with this court, I said to Miss Callender—

"This is the famous Angels' Court, where Maud Assheton was murdered; and here it is where her spirit is supposed to walk."

Miss Callender immediately stopped, gazing around her with a look of alarmed curiosity.

"Come!" cried Mr. Merton from the other end of the gallery, in a tone far too peremptory to be polite.

"Tell me about Maud Assheton," exclaimed Miss Callender.

In the imperfect light it seemed to me that

Mr. Merton's face looked towards us with a paleness on it that was startling.

"Come!" he called in a voice whose harshness he could not entirely subdue; "the ghost will catch you, Miss Callender, if you linger."

She uttered an exclamation of feigned alarm, and ran gracefully towards him. I was in the act of following Lady Callender, who was "moving on" with more activity than she had heretofore exhibited, perchance inspired with a livelier apprehension than she would have liked us to guess, when I heard—heard with distinctness—a sound, emanating I knew not whence—whether from above, or below, or without—which resembled a human voice crying; nor yet crying—it was a sound like a wail or a moan, subdued, but plaintive, long-drawn and thrilling.

I stopped as though transfixed, with my heart hammering in my breast, staring around. Superstition rose black at my side, pointed with shadowy finger to the dark corners of the court, and, with magic movement, defined upon the gloom a fantasy at which I gazed with fascinated eyes.

"Do you wish me to lock you up here, Miss Malcolmson?" exclaimed Mr. Merton,

in a voice so deep and irritable that it instantly broke the spell, and I walked hastily towards him. The others were a little in advance. He said, in a quick harsh whisper:

"Why did you not come when I called?"

"I was terrified, sir—I heard a noise."

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, shutting the door with a smart bang. "You are as bad as Mardon!"

"Miss Callender," he continued, "you will congratulate yourself on learning that here is a young lady, compared to whose spirit yours is heroical. She has been terrified—by what, think you?"

"What? what?"

"A noise."

"What was the noise?" she asked as I approached her.

"It was no doubt my fancy," I answered: "and yet the sound was as defined as my own voice. I heard a moan."

"Did you see the ghost?" asked Miss Callender.

"I think I should have seen something like a ghost had I waited a few minutes longer," I replied, forcing a smile.

"Think of such credulity in the nineteenth century!" exclaimed Mr. Merton, impatiently.

"Had you lived in Cotton Mather's time, you would have been the fiercest of the witch-finders."

"I cannot help using my ears, sir," I answered meekly.

"True, but what is the use of your ears if you don't bring your common sense to bear upon the reports they make?" he asked, with a somewhat disagreeable laugh. "However," he continued, walking quickly forwards, "let us make haste to get out of this haunted neighbourhood. The east wings are in such a dismantled condition that I am almost ashamed to show you them, Lady Callender. But your daughter's curiosity must be gratified at any expense of pride."

I followed them lost in thought. I could not rid myself of the belief that the sound I had heard was a veritable sound; and yet it was absurd to suppose that it had been anything more than my fancy. It had seemed to me loud enough for the others to hear, but they had not mentioned having heard it. Repeatedly as I had traversed the gallery on my way to and from the drawing-room, I had never heard any such sound, though I had frequently lingered in the Court endeavouring in the imperfect light to make out the

subjects of the faded pictures that hung upon the wall.

Mr. Merton spoke little after we left the Angels' Court. He excused his taciturnity by saying that the portion of the house we were now exploring was of comparatively recent date, and that he was unacquainted with stories that might be attached to it.

I had hitherto believed that there was only one way of returning to the west wing, and that it led through the Angels' Court. But though we retraced our steps through many of the rooms we had passed, Mr. Merton avoided the court by taking us round by other chambers and passages, ushering us eventually into the ante-room that opened into the hall.

"There," he said, as we entered the brilliant daylight of the west wing, "I hope, Miss Callender, that I have succeeded in satisfying your curiosity, and that you will not care to traverse those gloomy rooms again. For my part, I find them so dull and cheerless, that a visit to them always leaves me depressed."

CHAPTER XI.

MR. MERTON TAKES MY OPINION.

I HAD been made to feel by Mr. Merton's manner to me in the Angels' Court that I had annoyed him by lingering in it; and the sense that I had again involuntarily provoked his resentment grieved and fretted me greatly. I felt the most unhappy of women. It seemed my lot now always to do the thing Mr. Merton would not have me do. And yet what, in reality, had I done to make him angry? I had spoken, and with caution, of the murder to Miss Callender; and I had loitered a brief moment in the Angels' Court when he had manifested an impatience to leave it. These were the crimes of which I had been guilty. Was it reasonable that matters so trivial should have excited his anger?

I made sure that he would speak to me in private on his show of temper in the Angels' Court, and ask me about the sound that had frightened me, of which you have read all that I told him. But he did not recur to the subject, though he might easily have done so had he chosen on the same day, for he came and sat with Laura and me for about ten minutes while the ladies were writing letters.

The recollection of his warmth or of my delinquency appeared to have passed out of his mind; he addressed me with great gentleness. I longed to ask him why he should have been angry with me for staying a moment or two in the gallery; but as he did not mention the subject, I thought it best to keep silent on it too.

Yet in spite of his recurrence to his old, familiar behaviour, the memory of his harsh whisper and his dark frown could not fail to make me meditative. Nor indeed was that the only cause of the deep abstraction which from time to time possessed me to such a degree as to render me like one dead to the interests surrounding me. The sound I had heard in the gallery—though by what uttered and whence it had issued I could not conceive

—had been too definite and real for imagination to reject as false, though my common-sense had imperiously declared it so. Something like a feeling of mingled awe and terror grew up in my mind as I pondered it. Was it possible that, in spite of the ridicule that had been levelled at the superstition, its votaries did not err in deeming that such things as ghosts existed? It was true that the sound I had heard was a material sound, such as, one might think, could only issue from human lungs; and yet I had read that those who had been terrified by the visitation of ghosts had been addressed by them in mortal accents; so that, if the possibility of apparitions were conceded, their habit of delivering their messages in the voice with which they spoke when they inhabited the body might easily be credited.

I fought hard with the superstitious emotions which gathered in my heart. I do not think they ever mastered me; but had they, my weakness might hardly deserve your ridicule. Irrespective of the fact that my mind had been rendered singularly impressionable by the softening influences of love, and by the indulgence of a roving, indefinite fancy, I was surrounded by conditions peculiarly friendly to the development of the pitiful quality of

credulity, which resembles faith as bigotry resembles religion. The gloomy old house, the sullen chambers pregnant with interests austere and cheerless, for which it was impossible to have more sympathy than one has with the dust or the skeleton in a coffin that has been under the soil for a century; the murder, colouring the gloom of tradition with the lurid light of a latter-day horror; the disappearance of Wakefield, so suggestive of mystery and fear and death; above all the enduring melancholy of Mr. Merton, which, in spite of the brief relief that had been imparted by the gay prattle of Miss Callender, still enveloped him like a garment; these conditions of my daily life all served to create an atmosphere in which the weed of superstition would congenially blow its poisonous blossoms.

The incident in the gallery gave new force and feeling to the yet sickly sentiment of credulity. I began to trace consistency in actions which had hitherto appeared to me to have been dictated by no solider movement than caprice. Was the reason Mr. Merton had given me for locking up the old part of the house and forbidding any of the members of his household to enter it, sufficient? Was it

really the case that the servants had loitered in the old rooms, and even held their festivities there? I remembered now the sudden wrath that had possessed him long ago when he had met Laura and me one morning in the gallery, the eager asperity with which he had questioned me, his ghastly paleness. And now again, that very morning, had he looked towards me with a face as pale as stone and passionately chided me for lingering. What was there about this bleak and cheerless Angels' Court that made him white, and restless, and fierce? Should I condescend to believe in the existence of the ghost that was said to haunt that place, and to which Marden had been the last witness to testify; and deem that Mr. Merton himself had encountered it, and that the horror with which the apparition had inspired him, had determined him to close the rooms and ban the house as haunted? Or was he the victim of some wild delusion? The very strength of his intellect would make the delusion that entered his mind tenacious and baleful. But what was his delusion? that the house was really haunted? that he had seen the ghost? had it reference to his wife's murder?

I knew nothing—I could conjecture nothing.

The sense of mystery had suddenly thickened the air I breathed, darkened the life around me. I tried to grope my way to a solution; but I staggered and halted in the midnight blackness. And amid the impenetrable gloom Superstition rose straight and strong.

Still my love glowed brightly in my heart. But all its illumination was within. No ray from it pierced the darkness that had suddenly encompassed me without.

I had no idea how long Lady Callender and her daughter proposed to stop at Ashleigh Manor. But a fortnight slipped away without their exhibiting any disposition to leave. They had obviously made up their minds to enjoy themselves; and they did. No doubt they would have relished more society could they have procured more than the few friends whose visits Mr. Merton submitted to. Yet they were happy enough, especially Miss Callender. They took long drives, sometimes accompanied by Mr. Merton, sometimes alone. Miss Callender had a horse placed at her disposal, and followed by Mr. Merton's groom, would canter a whole morning across the country. They read, they worked, the young lady sang and mamma listened; they went

upon the sea which made Lady Callender sick; but her daughter took pleasure in the dangerous diversion of sailing in an open boat, or in rowing, and I may add, in fishing; and again and again carried her ladyship down into the deep waters to restore her to the luncheon or dinner-table as yellow as a sickly Frenchman, and with a temporary loathing of food.

Indeed Miss Callender grew more vivacious and sprightly the longer she remained at Ashleigh Manor. She was for ever challenging Mr. Merton to sing, or to play at chess, or to read to her, or to do anything in short that involved a *tête-à-tête*, which the longer it lasted the better she liked it.

It seemed to me that he took as much pleasure in her company as it was possible for a man to take who seemed incessantly self-engrossed. Doubtless my jealousy imparted to my eyes too keen a perception, and I may have seen more than the truth; yet it would often strike me that he was watching the door when she was absent, as if expecting her entrance, and that his face would brighten up when she spoke to him, or when they met.

It did not occur to me at the beginning

that her ladyship had any particular object in her somewhat effusive politeness to Mr. Merton; nor that she played second fiddle to her daughter, that the concert might be harmonious from any other motive than the pardonable pride a mother is privileged to take in her daughter, and a wish to show her off to the best advantage. But as the time slipped by, it was to be seen that Lady Callender was playing the game which, of all the games that are played in this life, the cynic most loves to stand by and watch. Mr. Merton was a widower; his income was—I know not what, but unquestionably large; he was the possessor of a noble estate; he was descended from an old and respectable family; he was still comparatively a young man; he was clever and engaging; and if he was not what Miss Callender would consider a handsome man, he was rich enough to do things handsomely; and to your husband-catcher, handsome is that handsome does.

Her ladyship did not play her cards with as much tact as might have been expected. She showed her hand too often, and (with an humble apology for the joke) led off so often with hearts as to make it apparent that she played only for diamonds. But Miss Callen-

der amply supplied her deficiencies which, to be just, were neither many nor glaring. The girl was nimbler and shrewder than the matron. I saw that she had gained a far deeper insight into Mr. Merton's character than her mother had. She had plenty of audacity, but it was well jockied by self-control, which kept its eye upon all the sign-posts, stuck to the highways, and never rode over private property—under which I include sensibilities, moods, the desire of secrecy, in short, everything you are not to touch upon or wound in your neighbour.

You observe that I can be generous in speaking of the girl whose attentions to Mr. Merton gave me infinite pain. I can't think of her with admiration, because I loved the man she tried to win; and even apart from this, I always fancy that the woman who plays at courtship instead of leaving that diversion to the man, whose business it is, loses the better part of her sex, which is modesty, however dexterously she may act her part. Still had not my own interests and feelings been so deeply involved in the issue, I daresay I should have found a good deal of cleverness in this girl's handling of a difficult matter. She played her fiddle with great accuracy and

perception and taste, and made Mr. Merton almost gay with the pretty melodies she discoursed. It was her mother who did the mischief, by her too vehement accompaniment. A shrewd mother is always a reluctant mother; she lays hold of her daughter, and appears to pull her back, while she whispers to her to go forward. But Lady Callender kept her daughter back by being in too great haste to push her forward. I don't think those two smiled at each other in private as they did before us; I don't think very loving words were exchanged between them, after I have seen Lady Callender quite nullify the effects of her daughter's pretty fiddling by scraping on a sudden five or six discordant notes in quick succession, with a smile to let Conny observe that she was doing her best. But mothers, I am told, have this knack of meddling and muddling. Girls would often marry well if their mothers didn't wish them to marry better. Girls have fresh perceptions, which time has blunted or uprooted out of mammas. They know what to say and do better than mammas can tell them; but mamma will advise, and Lucy is obliged to obey; and Damon sees what the game is, and throws down his cards with a grin and an apology; and Lucy

is obliged to sit shuffling her cards until she can find another fool to cut and deal.

I could not guess what Mr. Merton's opinion was of Miss Callender. Sometimes I would think he honestly liked her. At other times I would fancy that he was laughing at her in his sleeve. I knew that he was shrewd enough to see the game that she was playing; but his behaviour left me in doubt whether after all he would not let her win.

And yet I could never honestly bring myself to believe that Miss Callender's was a character he could sincerely relish and admire. Her humour might divert him; her gay prattle please him; her society serve as a distraction. But would there not be something of contempt mixed up in the feelings with which he watched her? enough, at least, to make love impossible, though his melancholy might make her company necessary to him.

Meanwhile, how much longer were they going to remain at Ashleigh Manor? A fortnight passed away, and then a month, and then six weeks. Was Mr. Merton prevailing upon them to prolong their stay, or had they begun to consider themselves fixtures?

One morning I came in from a walk with Laura on the sands. I left her in the bed-

room, and went downstairs to the library. There I found Mr. Merton reading a newspaper.

He and I had had very little to say to each other for some time. The fault was his, not mine, for over and over again had my love yearned for the gentle words he had been used to speak to me, for the tender smiles he had been used to give me, which had lingered in my mind long after he had forgotten them, as the brightest memories my heart cherished. But latterly he had iced his familiar manner to me with a thin coating of reserve. I felt no longer the ease I was accustomed to enjoy in his presence. His restraint chilled me off. What has caused this change? was the ceaseless inquiry of my heart. Could it be possible that he had guessed I loved him? That thought was so hateful to me, that I refused to entertain it. To feel that he knew my love, and that he recoiled from me because of his knowledge—the thought was too humiliating, too lowering, too debasing. What then? Ay, what then? Was all my life to vapour away in questioning myself about this man? I would not condescend to interrogate. I wrapped my love in my pride, and gave no sign of my pain.

When I entered, he looked up from the newspaper, and seeing me, rose and handed me a chair. I accepted this piece of politeness as an intimation of his wish to have a chat.

He began by speaking about Laura, saying that though his heart was always with her, he had, somehow, of late, not found the leisure to question me about her progress, as had been his custom. Was she not growing a beautiful creature? would she not nobly represent him? how fairy-like were her movements! how lovely the tint of her hair! how fond she was of him!

"Does she like Miss Callender?"

"I believe so."

"Does she ever talk of her?"

"No; but that is because she is used to her, and can find nothing to say."

"What is your opinion of Miss Callender?"

He looked and spoke as he used to do when he would come to the Red Room and talk to me after Laura was in bed. I felt grateful to him, though my pride was sorely stirred by my weakness. But pride must always be opposed to love.

"I think she is a pleasant young lady."

"And clever?"

"Yes, clever."

"She is clever and she is pleasant. She is clever to make herself pleasant. Not many have that art. Lady Callender is very obliging and agreeable."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think so?"

"You say so, and I therefore presume she is. Her ladyship and I have not exchanged many words. But then you cannot expect a woman of title to stoop to converse with a governess."

"You grow sour, Miss Malcolmson, as you get years. Good wine becomes rich through age, not acid."

"Most people judge wine more by its label than its quality. I dare say if I label myself Good-natured, the world will accept the vintage as genuine."

"Tell me now what label you would affix to Miss Callender?"

"I have not considered, sir."

"There are people who try to make their claret pass for port. It was old Dr. Johnson who said that claret was only fit drink for boys, port for men, brandy for heroes. But heroes are scarce, and may be left out of the question. Lady Callender has set a bottle

before me, and wants me to drink its contents. She calls it port; if so, it is proper for me to drink, being a man; but if it is claret, I had best leave it for boys. What is it?"

"You have tasted it pretty often, sir; you should know."

"I have sipped it, as you say; but in order to get the true flavour of a wine it is necessary to take a mouthful. But then I am no critic. My taste has been spoiled. For a good many years I have been fed with vinegar, and you can conceive I don't like wine that has any acidity. Shall it be port, Miss Malcolmson?"

"Or vin ordinaire?".

He burst into a fit of laughter; but never was laughter so devoid of merriment.

"If I were king," he said, "you should be my prime minister. Brevity is the soul of something more useful than wit—I mean, good advice. You have put me on my guard. I will no longer mistake an inferior claret for port. But how the taste may be deceived! I have some mean acquaintances who, when they give a ball, regale their guests on the most abominable wines. But the guests drink these London vintages and think them excellent; and why? because they are surrounded

with bright eyes, and flowers, and they drink to the measure of music and women's laughter. Such accompaniments make the vilest mixture relishable. Do you mark the parable?"

"Yes, sir."

"When a shrewd, middle-aged lady offers her claret for port, it will be drunk for port by those who don't take the distillation on its merits. Instead of looking through the glass like a connoisseur, they keep their gaze fixed on the sweet creature that proffers it—on her yellow hair and brilliant eyes and charming figure.

"'Drink to me only with thine eyes!'

Ay, that is a cup which holds rich liquor for fools. But how when you get to the dregs—I mean, the soul? Is it pleasant to find the liquor a concoction of bark and wormwood, and other things mentioned in the pharmacopœia? I know one who drank verjuice out of the goblet which he called beauty; and his soul is gangrened in consequence—and still he is not green."

For once his humour was out of the reach of my sympathy. I could only listen, hardly understand him.

"Lady Callender is so much delighted with

the scenery of this neighbourhood that she is going to take a house here."

"Indeed."

"The air agrees with Miss Callender."

I smiled.

"They have begged leave to remain at Ashleigh Manor until they can furnish the house they have in their minds. The house can be rented to-morrow; the furnishing thereof will not take longer than a fortnight. By August, Miss Malcolmson, we shall be left alone in our glory."

"You will miss them, sir."

"Perhaps not in the sense you mean. Still you must allow Miss Callender to be a sprightly young lady."

"Sprightly in the sense of mental activity. She is copious, naïve, and knowing."

"Excellent! the adjectives epitomise her. Naïve and knowing—the words are as good as alliterative, and they distinctly specify her wares. How rude, how inhospitable I am, how ungentlemanly, to make merry at the expense of my guests! But the sheep might kick the butcher if it could, when the knife was at its throat, without sacrificing its claims upon our compassion as a meek and inoffensive beast."

"It is not a knife but an arrow that is aimed at you, sir; and I have read—in Waller, I think—that the wound which that sort of weapon makes is rather pleasant than otherwise."

"If the barb be poisoned?"

"Oh, the poison is an after-pain. I speak of the first smart."

"But the arrow may hit the head instead of the heart, and then common sense is wounded and bleeds."

"The patient that receives the arrow generally invites it with a bared breast."

"The archer may miss his aim."

"Then that is a sign that the victim swerves, and is not sincere in his wish to be shot."

"You have been rather reserved of late, Miss Malcolmson; but I am glad to see that rest has not deprived your tongue of its old cunning."

Reserved! is not this always the case? Is not the behaviour you witness in a friend invariably charged upon you by him? "The reason I was cold," you tell your bosom friend, "was because I noticed that *you* were cool." "*I* cool!" cries the bosom friend; "why, I wasn't in the least cool until I made sure by your manner that you meant to cut me!"

"What is truth?" asked jesting Pilate. Like him we will not wait for an answer; but it was very hard to be called reserved by Mr. Merton. I swallowed my emotion as best I might, and answered,

"Even if the old cunning you compliment me on had left me, I might still continue to be witty on the recollection of the good things I daily enjoy the pleasure of hearing from Miss Callender."

"At that rate you not only allow her to be witty herself but the cause of wit in others. That is a large compliment for one woman to pay another behind her back. Do you admire her face?"

"I dare say that out of a hundred persons ninety-five would think her beautiful. I should be among the five to admire her moderately."

"Ah, you prove yourself a true member of your sex. I never yet met a woman who would allow another the possession of unqualified charms. You all of you have a wonderful knack of hinting a doubt and hesitating dislike. Strange that women would much rather concede intellect than beauty to one another, as if intellect were not the more enviable."

"It is natural that women should envy the

quality which gives its possessor the best chances in the world, and sets her above her fellows. It is the fault of the men that women envy beauty and not intellect. If your sex fell in love with ours for our wits and not for our faces, you would find women hating each other for their brains instead of their eyes and complexions and figures."

Having delivered myself of which I left my chair, thinking that the conference had been sufficiently prolonged, and that he might want to resume his newspaper. He did not offer to detain me, and I returned to Laura.

I suppose you do not want me to tell you that I quitted that room in very different spirits from those in which I entered it. It was delightful to me to see him return to his old manner, and speak to me with the freedom and semi-sportiveness which was a finer compliment than anything he could have said to me. But the real secret of my sudden elation and joyousness was the knowledge that my long jealousy was groundless, that he had summed up Miss Callender and her mother with a cynical astuteness that persuaded me that all love was out of the question.

Though I believed he had not the faintest notion that I loved him, it was deep hap-

piness to me to feel that he did not love Miss Callender. The thaw of his own reserve had melted mine; and my spirits were so good at lunch and during dinner that I caught her ladyship looking at me several times with cold disapprobation, as if she thought there was something indecent in my laughter, and in the smart turn I gave to my remarks. I could watch now the bright glances Miss Callender bestowed on Mr. Merton, and the apparently pleased smiles with which he returned the gay salutation of her eyes, without being in the least degree affected. Nay, something like a sentiment of pity entered the feelings with which I regarded the young lady, bringing with it, I am afraid, a slight infusion of contempt. I felt the importance of knowledge—how much wiser I was than she. The man she was ogling and simpering to, and attitudinising before, in the possible conviction that every look she gave him was forging a new link in the chain that was to make him her captive, and keep him bound to the triumphal car of her beauty, had shown me his heart. What if she had been able to peep into that show-box! What if her ladyship had been indulged with a look! Ah, in Pity's name, put out the light, or give the crank an-

other turn, and let the odious picture pass away.

It was quite true what Mr. Merton had told me, that her ladyship proposed to take a house in the neighbourhood of Ashleigh. A few days after that conversation the house was taken—a picturesque little villa called Cliff Lodge—and my lady made it the subject of a chat at dinner.

She told me that the air agreed with her and Conny, that she was in love with the beautiful scenery, the sea, the cliffs; it was pleasant, moreover, she said, to live in the same place with so old and valued a friend as Mr. Merton. London had no charms for her now; and Conny had taken quite an aversion to the tumult of the streets, the sameness and weariness of evening parties, the hot theatres and opera-houses.

"Ashleigh has spoiled her for a town life," said she.

"I dare say," said I, "that Miss Callender will begin to long for London again after she has been at Ashleigh a few months."

"Indeed not," cried that young lady, warmly. "I don't care if I never see London again. I love the country and the beautiful flowers and the tall trees and the blue sky.

I have been so happy at Ashleigh Manor," she added, with a little glance at Mr. Merton, "that any other place except Cliff Lodge would be quite hateful."

"You see, Miss Malcolmson," said Lady Callender, as if she thought it requisite to justify her withdrawal from Londen by some less poetical reasons than her daughter had given, "my poor husband being dead, it matters little to me where I live. I have only to consider Conny, and her tastes, therefore, are mine. We have indeed many friends in London, but none," said she, with a look at Mr. Merton, "whom we value, or whose society is sufficiently prized, to take us away from Ashleigh."

A month passed, however, before Cliff Lodge was ready for their reception. Mr. Merton offered his services, and seemed to find pleasure in superintending the work of the upholsterer. Her ladyship was deeply obliged to him for his kindness, and so was Conny. If words make gratitude, no man ever served more grateful people. I don't say he did not deserve their thanks, or that his services were light. Lady Callender was for ever taking him into her confidence on the smallest matters connected with the house.

She assured him that Miss Callender refused to be guided by anybody's taste but his. Indeed there was almost nothing that the old lady did not, by a species of motherly jugglery, contrive to transform into a compliment to him.

When eventually mother and daughter left us, how touching was the leave-taking! Mr. Merton lent them his carriage to take them to their house, which was situated about two miles from Ashleigh Manor; but he had excused himself from accompanying them by pleading an engagement. So many thanks for his kindness, for his hospitality, for his attention, as Lady Callender poured forth, her face decorated with the most gracious smiles at her disposal, her eyes moist with excess of gratitude. And you should have seen Miss Callender kiss Laura! You would have thought that they were sisters, and that the elder one was going away for ever, to see the way she hugged the little girl. But the tit-bit of the performance was her bidding good-bye to Mr. Merton. Oh, let me drop the curtain. Are we not all men and brothers and sisters? Is it for any one of us to show up each other's weakness? Drop curtain! Out lights! Off, ye fiddlers! The foot-

man has closed the door upon the retreating carriage, the ladies have pocketed the cambric which they have been waving, and it is time to begin another chapter.

CHAPTER XII.

A FORMIDABLE GUEST.

WHAT was the secret of Mr. Merton's depression? What memory did his mind store to fret his face into thinness and paleness, and hold him gloomy and sullen for hours together? The presence of the Callenders had, indeed, called him, so to speak, out of himself; their demands upon his politeness and attention had given him something to do; nor was it easy for him to be in Miss Callender's company and continue morbid. And yet, underlying his frequent affectations of ease, when her merry temper challenged his smiles, I could distinctly witness the presence of a deep and enduring melancholy. I often wondered that Miss Callender or her mother had not taken greater notice of his depression. Notice it they certainly did; but it was made intelligible to them by his wife's

death. They might also have conceived, as indeed other people would, that his temperament was by nature melancholic.

But these suppositions in no wise satisfied me. I had been ready enough at the beginning, as you have read, to attribute his despondency to the integrity of his character, that made him mourn over his treatment of his wife; which, though I never would believe it to have been harsh, might still seem harsh to the memory which her cruel and terrible death had softened and saddened. That he regretted his wife's death itself I never for a moment believed. She had been dead more than a year now, and his melancholy was deeper than it had ever been. Hence it was no longer possible to suppose that it bore any reference to his wife. The more I meditated his behaviour, the more I felt convinced that I must seek its solution in other causes than those which had for a long time satisfied me.

I can give no reason for the strange theory that grew up in my mind that his melancholy was in some way identified with the Angels' Court; unless it were the resentment he had exhibited on my having lingered in it a few moments. But this would not suffice to

account for the notion; nor could I account for it by recalling the strange sound which had smote upon my ears whilst following the others along the gallery. That sound or cry I had made up my mind to dismiss as a trick of imagination. Inwardly, had I questioned myself, I should have found myself positive that I had heard in the Angels' Court a note —a cry—the echo of a human voice; but I could not suffer the whispers of what I deemed superstition to overrule the violent decision of reason; and so I ceased to allow the recollection of it to perplex me.

Yet the notion gathered and grew into a conviction that there was some singular, inexplicable alliance, so to speak, between Mr. Merton's depression and the Angels' Court.

Was he the victim of a delusion? What could there be about that austere, chilly place to make him miserable? Had he committed some wrong the memory of which overspread his heart with a gloom as sullen as that which shrouded the court and made its shadows and the sight of it hateful to him?

Wrong! what wrong could such a man have done? This man who dwelt in my love as the type of all that is honourable and upright and worthy?

Yet think as I would, his dulness endured and so did the mystery of it. Would he consider it a great liberty if I questioned him? If his heart ached, he must needs yearn at times for some one in whom he might confide his sorrow. Why should he not confide in me? He would, if he could but guess how I loved him, how I would have laid down my life for him.

My heart beat violently at first at the very idea of questioning him on his melancholy; so greatly did I dread his anger, so pitifully did his resentment pain and humble me. But my love whispered courage. It told me that it was my duty to ease him of his grief and soothe him if I could; and these fancies gave strength to a resolution which after a long, long delay, I one night put into practice.

I had seen Laura to bed and returned to the drawing-room where I had left Mr. Merton. My determination to speak to him had kept me quiet and thoughtful during the evening. After I had seated myself he looked up from his book and asked me if I did not feel well.

"I feel very well, sir. But I am a little dull."

"Why?"

An opportunity that led to a direct discussion of the subject was not to be shirked. My heart beat as I answered,

"I feel dull because you are."

He slightly raised his eyebrows.

"I had no idea," he answered rather coldly, "that you were so sympathetic. What makes you think me dull?"

"Your manner."

"Surely, Miss Malcolmson, you have lived long enough in this house to know that this manner of which you speak is natural to me."

"It is not natural to you," I answered hardily.

He looked so surprised that I was afraid he was going to reprimand me for my boldness.

"You appear to have made me your study," he said quietly.

"I am grieved and pained to see you dull, sir," I exclaimed impulsively; "I remember the many obligations you have conferred on me, and would give a great deal if it were in my power to repay your kindness by making you happier."

A smile overspread his face.

"I am sure you are honest in your good wishes, Miss Malcolmson, and I beg you to believe that I am not ungrateful. But still I

must say that you exaggerate my manner—you think me dull when I am not. You confound constitutional with acquired qualities. I repeat that it is my nature to be melancholy."

"You cannot deceive me, sir.....pray forgive me.....I am taking an inexcusable liberty—but I cannot see you suffering and not speak to you. I cannot see your great depression without hazarding your anger by....." I broke down. My feelings were proving too strong for me. I dreaded that they would betray me and make me unwomanly in his eyes and provoke his scorn.

He rose and took my hand: his touch thrilled me.

"I never knew until now," he said tenderly, "how sincere a friend I have in you. It is a great pleasure to me to feel that I have your friendship. I should be unworthy of it if I allowed myself to be the cause of melancholy in you. Believe me, I am not melancholy, not dull, not depressed, as you think me."

He let fall my hand and went back to his chair.

"Do you judge me sad because I have withdrawn from society? My retirement is no penance. I never cared for society. The false life I led in it with my wife—smiling when my

heart was breaking, stung by the sense that behind my back I was an object of ridicule and compassion to my friends—these memories make me detest society. I can give you no reason for what you think my melancholy; and therefore I tell you I am not melancholy. Do not be misled by my looks. I sleep well, my health is good, I enjoy God's blessed daylight. I find deep happiness in the society of my child, I can be gay if I choose—have you not seen me merry with Miss Callender ?—these things would be impossible if I were possessed with the sadness you ascribe to me. Take my word for it—you are mistaken; but you are mistaken so kindly, so unselfishly, so sincerely, that your error still leaves me under a heavy obligation."

But I was not to be convinced. The touch of his hand had given life and strength to my spirits; his soft words a new force to my love; to desist now would be to leave matters as I had found them; and my heart was yearning to solve the mystery of his sorrow.

"If I had not dared to watch you, sir, when you have often thought yourself unobserved, your language would convince me that I had spoken without a knowledge of your character. But those very smiles which Miss Callender's

remarks used to excite, only served to disclose to me the depths of the melancholy with which I am as certain you are afflicted as that there is a God in heaven. Your laughing words, your gay moods, were but new revelations of your sorrow, lights playing across the darkness of your trouble and intensifying its gloom. Oh, sir, do not smile at this figurative language. Make me happy by telling me if I can in any way lighten you of your sorrow let it be what it will."

His face grew pale. He bit his lip quickly, looked at me for a moment, then fixed his eyes on his hand with which he drummed on the table.

"Your sincerity makes you pertinacious, Miss Malcolmson," he said constrainedly. "It makes you sceptical too. You will not take my word. Perhaps you have a reason for distrusting me?"

His eyes glowed under the sudden shadow that darkened his brows.

"I have no reason but your melancholy."

"You cannot think me melancholy without a reason. What is the reason you assign?"

I bated not a jot of heart. I had gone so far courageously. He might be angry at what he would consider my impertinence; he might

misconstrue my intention and conceive me playing the part I had ridiculed in Miss Callender; but I felt if I could only master his secret I could make him happier; and hope illuminated my love with the sense of the claims it would have upon him through my ministrations. I returned his steady gaze bravely and said:

"Is there not some mysterious affinity between your melancholy and the Angels' Court?"

A sudden spasm contracted his face, and his paleness grew for the moment livid. He half rose from his chair, so menacingly that I recoiled, then fell back breathing heavily.

"What do you mean?" he asked in a whisper so breathless, so tragical in its subdued intensity that I prayed God I might never hear the like again.

I was too terrified to answer.

"What do you mean?" he repeated.

I replied stammeringly "I cannot believe you to be superstitious, and yet I have sometimes thought—" my courage failed me.

"Thought what!" he cried fiercely.

"Oh, sir," I exclaimed piteously, "I thought you might have seen the ghost that is said to haunt the Angels' Court, and that you had

converted it into an omen which made you melancholy."

He stared as if not comprehending, or as if doubting me. A keen light glowed in his eyes, and it seemed as though he were searching my very spirit. The expression of mingled doubt and passion faded off his face; yet again he fixed his penetrating eyes on mine. Then his frown relaxed, he threw his head back, and burst into a fit of laughter, loud, hollow, and so eerie, that I have no words to describe the sensation it produced in me.

Confounded and amazed by this unexampled display of unreal merriment, I sat watching him, trembling in every limb with sincere fear.

"And has it come to this!" he cried, "that I, a two-score-year-old man of the world, a man who makes a boast of his muscle and nerve, a man who pretends to have a mind of his own and a knowledge of logic to support its affirmations—that *I* should be thought capable of being terrified by a ghost! My little friend, what have you said? what do you think me? Are you not confounding me with Laura, or worse, with Mardon? Now you make me proud! now, indeed, do you compliment me! Why, I always thought you had a tolerable

opinion of my understanding. What a fall—from intelligence to ghost-seeing!"

And once again he threw his head back, and burst into a prolonged peal of mirthless laughter.

"You make me feel terribly ashamed of myself," I exclaimed, blushing deeply, and ready to burst into tears, so keen was the sense of humiliation and discomfiture.

"But consider, Miss Malcolmson, consider—that I should see a ghost."

"I only fancied——"

"Why *will* you fancy? why distress yourself? do you want to make me wretched by insisting on my melancholy? Have you never heard the story of the friends who combined together to put a healthy man into a sick-bed by telling him that he looked desperately ill? You don't know what an imagination I have. By telling me I am miserable you will make me so."

"I'll never take the liberty again, sir——"

"Then you will be my friend indeed. Why, you almost made me angry just now. Good heaven! your face wore such a melo-dramatic look, that when you spoke of the Angels' Court I thought you were going to charge me with—the murder of Maud Assheton herself.

Come, confess that suspicion is aggravating, especially before the charge is definitely preferred. Give me your hand; you will have me melancholy no more, will you?"

"No, sir," I answered, placing my hand in his.

"Now you are like your old self. Allow me less melancholy and more intellect, that I may not be wretched nor see ghosts. What would Miss Callender think if she should hear of your accusation? She would never look at me again; for next to her terror of ghosts would naturally be her fear of the wretch who had seen one. I once told you," he continued, gravely, "of the only ghosts that I believe in; and *they* walk only amid the night of memory. You look dejected, and well you may be; but why do you excite me?"

"I deeply regret having done so."

"I am naturally a passionless man; but when I am warmed I grow violent. Earthquakes, I have read, are often very terrible in lands where their occurrence is rare. So it is with passion. Come, you have heard the genuine thunder; you know now what noisy weapons lie concealed under the cold, calm, rugged fortress you have attempted to take

by storm. But the white flag of truce is flying; we have shaken hands; and now let us bury our dead, and forget the fight."

And this was all that came out of my resolution to master his secret and make him lighter-hearted.

The conversation was never recurred to afterwards by either of us. Literally we both carried out his injunction to bury our dead, though I cannot say that I forgot the fight. But one good end it achieved: and that was, it made me determined to harass myself no longer with speculations, but just to quietly perform my duties. It left me, indeed, a hundredfold more puzzled than it had found me; but that was for the best, as the gloom which imagination had before lighted with its ridiculous theory was now utterly opaque, and rendered inquiry simply and absolutely futile.

The Callenders called often, as you may believe. Her ladyship's income was sufficient to enable her to keep a carriage, and this she found wonderfully useful in her visits to Ashleigh Manor. She and her daughter would frequently drive over from Cliff Lodge and spend the evening with us. Miss Callender, in her effusive manner, asked me to take Laura to see them. I did so, and was

honoured by her ladyship with the kind of reception she would probably accord to a head nurse. Laura, of course, she overwhelmed with kisses. I don't think I showed by my manner that I felt my lady's treatment at all, but I took a vow never to set foot in her house again, and kept it.

The house itself was cosy and pretty enough; near the sea, with a small wooded garden. It had been furnished rather too ostentatiously, I thought: there was too much satin and not enough of dimity; in short, the furniture was like a large and gaudy feather in a bonnet which a small plain feather would have made becoming. Mr. Merton had had the superintendence of the furnishing, and it was natural, perhaps, that his taste should err on the side of excess. After being used to the spacious rooms of Ashleigh Manor he could hardly be expected to bring his judgment down to the level of so small a house as Cliff Lodge. Yet her ladyship seemed very well satisfied; and Miss Callender repeatedly directed my attention to the furniture, and asked me if I did not think that Mr. Merton had shown exquisite taste in his selections.

If she imagined I would repeat her laudations to him, she was wrong. I held my

tongue, and for this reason—I had become jealous of her again.

This was to be expected. Heretofore, Mr. Merton's excursions beyond his own grounds had been of the rarest occurrence. Now he would very frequently have his horse saddled and ride over to Cliff Lodge. Twice I saw him at a distance with them on the sands. When they came to Ashleigh Manor he would give them as cordial a welcome as their hearts could desire. When they spent an evening with us, it is true I did not notice that his behaviour to Miss Callender was in any degree more indicative of love than it had ever been; but then it was not to be supposed that if he were becoming attached to her, he would be as demonstrative in his affection as a young man.

At all events there could be no doubt that he liked her society. There were few others now whom he honoured with even an occasional call besides the Callenders; but the Callenders he was constantly visiting. Was he really enamoured? Had he not been laughing at me in his sleeve when he pretended to sum up Miss Callender's character, and asked my opinion of her? It was not impossible but that he might have taken a

fancy to her from the very outset of their acquaintance. The language he had held to me proved nothing. The cynical views he had so often expressed to me on marriage would naturally make him careful to save himself from my laughter by taking my opinion on the girl before he announced his intention to marry her. This may seem a very egotistical statement; but I pray you to remember that a man of forty in love is of all living creatures the most susceptible of ridicule, and will go to great lengths to obviate a smile from one of his own servants. After forty Nature kindly allows a man to think that he is loved only for his person—a belief that preserves him from the fear of contempt.

Taking the interest in him I did, I ought to have been glad to see Mr. Merton find pleasure in the society of the Callenders. It showed in him a disposition to break from his recluse life which I considered to be the only cure for his melancholy. But I was not glad. Had he made friends again with his former acquaintances I should have been very well pleased; but it piqued, it pained, it tormented me to think of him in the company of the vivacious and flattering Miss Callender and her conspiring mother.

And yet it seemed ridiculous to suppose that he seriously meant to marry her. Conceded that he had found out the little game Miss Callender was playing, how it was his house and his fortune the pretty creature wanted to marry and not him; conceded that he had made this discovery—and I certainly judged he had from what he had told me,—but that the incense of flattery which her ladyship and her daughter burnt steadily under his nose had acted like a soporific and deprived his judgment of the faculty of perceiving the truth. Conceding this: still was it likely that this man whom marriage had made supremely wretched for the best years of his life would again slip his head into the noose without long deliberation, without a most careful and accurate inspection of the character of the lady he proposed to marry? He was no fool. Experience was not likely to have preached to him in vain. It seemed impossible to me that he could look upon a woman without beholding, as it were, the pale and passionate face of his dead wife sneering at him through the living lineaments.

And yet I would think, in reflecting upon him, that those very actions which I might deem impossible to him were in reality pre-

cisely those which were possible. A garment of mystery wrapped him around; and amidst it I could but dimly discern the real man. Motives which might prove the key to fit the character of other men, were inapplicable to him. He appeared to have locked up the chambers of his heart since the death of his wife and hidden the key in the very depths of his soul into which no human eye might penetrate. A sense of distance between him and me grew up. I loved him not less passionately; but my love became more dreamy by affecting an object which was withdrawing itself step by step away from the reach of my sympathies.

I could not help taking notice, however, that ever since the night when I had attempted to make myself master of the secret of his melancholy, he had manifested—yet so subtly that it was rather my instincts than my less delicate perceptions which recognised it—a species of uneasiness in his manner when conversing with me. At times, attracted by the magnetism which the steadfast eye exerts, I would raise my head suddenly and find him watching me, his eyes brilliant with such a keen and penetrating light that I would sometimes conceive he was possessed of the

power of illuminating the gloom of the heart by his gaze, and reading its secrets. I would sometimes think with mingled hope and alarm that he had interpreted my love by my impulsive confession of sympathy; and that the pleasure he took in dissecting the human mind led him into forming theories about me which kept his attention amused and vigilant. Again, I would imagine that his shrewd though furtive examinations were due to the ardent desire I had expressed to see or make him happy; and fancy that he was musing on my character to judge how far I was fit to receive the communication of the secret of his melancholy. For that he *was* melancholy—melancholy from a cause which a few words from him would render intelligible, and that his depression was in no wise referable to physical causes—the more I studied him the more persuaded I felt.

The summer had glided away, and autumn had come with its embrowned woods and deepened hues and flaming sunsets. Never was scene more lovely than the grounds of Ashleigh Manor on one of those beautiful and majestic August evenings. Delightful it was to stand upon the lawn and listen to the cool melodies of the fountains plashing their

diamond drops in the marble basins; while the sun glowing like liquid fire sank into its soft and shadowy bed of red and orange and violet cloud, making the windows burn with crimson suns each with a tiny glory of its own, and giving a fairy-like distinctness to the topmost branches and leaves of the high trees. Ever upon the air sounded the deep monotone of the ocean, creaming its breakers upon the strand, and so instinct with intelligence that you might liken it to the breathing of some mighty monster slumbering upon the beach. Overhead the rooks would beat the languid air with their cleft wings, sending forth their discordant notes which were made harmonious ere they met the ear by the intermingling voices of birds and the lowing of distant cattle. And calm and beautiful were the evenings which followed the voluptuous death of the days, with a white and tender moon mottling the land into marble, enriching with silver those vague outlines which not long before had been resplendent with the gold-colouring of sunlight, and making the night so tranquil and lovely that they seemed like sweet dreams of the glorious days they succeeded.

Strange that disease should so often choose the loveliest time of the year to breathe its

poisonous breath upon the world. Strange that out of so much loveliness should be generated the spectre who leaps as it were out of the very arms of mild-eyed, rose-tinted Nature to deal destruction and death upon mankind.

A pestilent fever broke out in Ashleigh when the nights were holy with tender moonlight, when the days were glowing with Italian skies and golden with the mantle of harvest.

The news was brought us by Lady Callender that typhus fever had broken out in the town. We made light of the report at first. We were a long way from Ashleigh, and the extent of the grounds seemed to promise us an immunity from the attack of the fell malady. But ere a week had passed we heard with dismay that some dozen persons had been carried off by the fever, that the alarm was spreading, and that many of the wealthier inhabitants were making haste to remove themselves out of reach of the pest.

Mr. Merton now began to grow alarmed. He gave strict orders to the servants to allow no one from the town to enter the house; and even went so far as to compel the tradesmen to take their orders from the gate-keeper who received the articles they brought and gave them to the servants. His fears were for

Laura. As from day to day intelligence reached him that the fever was on the increase, he grew fretful and impatient. He would call to Laura and me not to go into the grounds but remain in the library.

"You must contrive," he told me, "to keep her as much indoors as you can. The very air that comes to us from the town may be laden with death."

I wondered that he did not take Laura away and leave me in charge of the house until the fever should have passed. Many of his neighbours were departing or had departed; why did not he? I fancied that the idea had not occurred to him and made the suggestion.

"No," he exclaimed, "I will not leave my home. Why should I? For aught I could tell I might be leading Laura into the very jaws of the fever. The precautions I have taken should suffice. I have even written a note to Lady Callender and hinted a wish that she should not call here for the present, under the mask of entreating her to remain indoors herself. How could I receive her? I *will* not. The very kiss Miss Callender gives Laura might prove my darling's death-warrant."

Ay, it was true enough that death could

find a vehicle in a beautiful girl's kiss. Against the subtle, invisible poison of fever floating in the air, its fœtid breath disguised by the rich moist aroma of the autumn, what measures, what precautions could avail? Where was the door stout enough to keep the poison out? Where the wall so thick that the devilish enemy could not pass through it?

A servant sickened; the doctor was instantly summoned; and Mr. Merton was informed that the fever had found its way though the closed gates and over the broad acres of Ashleigh Manor into the house.

I was in the room when the doctor conveyed the intelligence to Mr. Merton that the servant had the fever. Mr. Merton turned deadly pale, and swore a violent oath—the only oath I ever heard fall from his lips.

"I ought to have had Laura removed before," he said. "If she is taken with the fever and dies of it, I shall have murdered her! God help me, what is to be done?"

The doctor replied that the child should be sent to another part of the house, as far removed as possible from the west wing, in which the sick servant was lying.

"But those who attend her may bring the fever to her?"

"You diminish the chance of contagion by removing her," answered the doctor."

"Very well. I will order a chamber in the east wing to be got ready for her."

When the doctor had gone he turned to me.

"Miss Malcolmson, if I go with Laura and watch over her in the east wing, sleep in the same room with her, and take your place until the doctor suffers her to return to this part of the house, you will not think I am playing a cowardly part? that I am making my child an excuse to hide myself away from the fever?"

"No, sir," I answered, as much surprised by his question as his resolution.

"My child," he continued, in a broken voice, "is my only joy—my only joy. It breaks my heart to think of anything happening to her. What would be my life without her? She is so precious to me that now I know death to be prowling near us, I must protect and watch her myself. I cannot even suffer my treasure to be left in your keeping, though next to myself, you would be the person to whom I would entrust her."

"We must hope and pray that danger will not come near her."

"Yes, pray for her. Yours is a sincere and innocent heart, Miss Malcolmson; God may hear your prayers. And yet how am I to hope? I have done all that fear and foresight could do to guard my household from this pestilence: and yet, above us, is one stricken by it. The atmosphere is loaded with the poison. Oh, God! Laura may be stricken with it herself now—even now as I am talking to you."

And he hurried wildly out of the room to the library where his child was playing.

Within the same hour I heard that directions had been given to one of the housemaids to prepare the uttermost rooms in the house for Mr. Merton and Laura. Mr. Merton was with the servant, going with her and returning with her, and superintending himself the arrangements he ordered. When I saw him his behaviour was hurried and agitated strangely; he appeared to have lost all self-control. I marvelled at the suspension in him of the powerful will which I had ever regarded as capable of supporting him under the heaviest load of trouble. There was even an incoherence in his speech; he seemed bewildered. He told me that I should see but little of him until the fever was extinct in his house, and

desired me to conduct his home in every respect as if I were its mistress. He took Laura himself to the rooms that had been prepared; and whilst crossing the hall I met him coming out of the ante-room that led to the old portion of the building. So great was his abstraction that he did not observe me, but passed on hastily and entered the library, the door of which he closed.

I descended to the kitchen where I had some instructions to give which detained me there. I then went to Laura's bedroom to make up a parcel of the things she would require in her new apartments. On going down the gallery stairs with the parcel, I heard the library door unlocked and Mr. Merton called, "Is that you, Miss Malcolmson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just step in here, will you?"

I went to him, and he closed the door after me.

"What have you got there?" he asked, looking at the parcel.

"Some things belonging to Laura which she will require."

"Give them to me; I will take them to her."

He laid the parcel on the table, and looking at me in a strange way, said:

"If this fever should attack me, it is more than likely I shall die; for mine is the sort of constitution that would succumb quickly to it. I believe you are a true friend of mine and Laura. Your long devotion to my child gives me ample assurance of your integrity. I therefore entrust to your keeping this letter I have just written, which you will open only after my death."

He produced a letter, sealed in no less than five places, which he held up but did not give me.

"I have written this," he continued, "in the apprehension that the fever may take and kill me. Delirium is a consequence of this malady; and I should not therefore be able to state those wishes which I have taken the precaution to write. Before delivering this letter into your keeping, I must exact a vow that you will not open it until you have been assured that I am dead."

I was greatly surprised by his mysterious manner and the solemn expression of his voice.

"I hope, sir, that you will consider my simple promise to obey your wishes sufficient," I said. "You must question my honesty if you make me take a vow. I shall consider you

have not the confidence in me which, knowing myself what my feelings are towards you and Laura, I think you ought to have."

"I do not distrust you. I have the fullest faith in your sincerity. I will not ask you to do more than promise. Promise me that you will not open this letter until you hear or see with your own eyes that I am dead."

"I promise, sir."

"Thank you."

He gave me the letter; I placed it in my pocket without looking at it.

"I should rather thank you, sir, for this mark of confidence," I said. "But why do you fear that you will take the fever?"

"I do not fear; I consider it a contingency. The wish to live makes me willing to distrust my own apprehensions; yet the contingency is likely enough to make that letter necessary. Understand, if I am spared I shall claim that letter from you again."

"You shall have it as you gave it."

He extended his hand. "This seems like a separation, does it not? I talk as if we were to be divided by miles instead of a few rooms. But for Laura's sake I mean to strictly seclude myself and her. May God spare us all! You incur a greater risk than I, and I seem

to be acting cowardly to leave you amid the danger from which I myself escape. But I implore you not to mistake my motive. I am acting, not for my own, but for Laura's sake."

It certainly had struck me as strange that he did not depute me to take charge of Laura. But there was so much that was mysterious in the whole man, that I found my mind questionless before his commands. He looked at me earnestly, as if he had something more to say, pressed my hand, and walked quickly out of the room.

The dreariest and longest afternoon that ever I remember followed. Though Mr. Merton and Laura were separated from me only by the interval of a line of rooms which were to be easily traversed in five minutes, the sense of distance, inspired by the long disuse of the portion of the house they occupied, made them, in fancy, as remote from me as if an ocean parted us. I missed Laura particularly. The absence of her sweet face created a void which temporarily possessed life with a singular air of unreality; and this air was made more defined—if indeed that which is vague can be made distinctive and individual—by the mysterious commission I

had received from Mr. Merton. Why had he singled me out to be the recipient of the statements he had written? Of what nature could those statements be which made their reception by a stranger like myself preferable to their reception by one equal in position with Mr. Merton?

I kept the letter in my pocket during the afternoon, nor once drew it forth to inspect it, so violently did I feel the restriction. But when the evening came, and my thoughts proved too oppressive to suffer me to solace myself with needlework or books, I reflected that it would surely be no breach of confidence to examine the envelope, and thereupon took the letter out of my pocket.

The envelope was addressed, in a bold hurried hand, to "Miss Malcolmson." On the other side were five seals, each bearing the impress of his crest—a stag's head and neck, on large circles of black wax. I hid the letter away again, refusing myself even the diversion of speculating upon its contents, for that would have been nearly as dishonourable as opening and reading it.

At about half-past seven the doctor called to see his patient, the servant. He came to me afterwards, and talked of Mr. Merton and

his wisdom in removing his child from the neighbourhood of the malady. He asked me if I had no fear, and I answered truthfully I had none. He told me that my courage was a good sign, and wished it were more prevalent, as he had observed that it was the timid who soonest yielded to the fever.

When I reflect, however, upon that time, I am surprised that I was without fear. The example of fear is as contagious as the sickness that causes it; and I wonder now that my mind did not catch something of the alarm which had dispatched Mr. Merton with his child to the extreme end of the building. But I need make no pretensions to philosophy by saying that because I was poor and friendless I had no fear of death. I should have been as much afraid of death as anybody in that house had my temper been morbid enough to muse upon it. In simple truth, I was not afraid of catching the fever, because I never imagined that I should; and I did not imagine I should, because my mind was distracted by a host of other considerations all claiming from me a greater significance than at that time I could vouchsafe to the contingency of sickness.

CHAPTER XIII.

DEATH.

RETIRED to rest that night in a very despondent mood. My imagination was, in consequence, active. Happily for my fancy the night was still; a gusty night would have made me very uneasy, for the voices of the wind take a depressing intelligence from the wakeful mind, and I did not want their eerie syllables to add a new stock of foreboding to my thoughts. I could not sleep for a long time. Above me lay one burning in the embrace of the fever; and on my right hand, divided from me by a thin partition, was a Memory more fell and sinister than the malignant malady overhead. The room in which Mrs. Merton was murdered had not, to my knowledge, been entered by living creature since the burial of its last occupant. Lying restless and wakeful on my

bed I pictured its gloom: I pictured the costly furniture that had made it as elegant as any drawing-room overspread with a layer of dust, and rendering by its finery more ghastly the recollections which the chamber held, as a corpse is made more hideous by the trappings which in life adorned it. Doubtless already the spiders—those active upholsterers in disused or haunted houses—had begun to festoon their dull-coloured cobwebs along the mouldings of the ceilings, upon the gilt frames of the mirrors, the rich cornices, perchance inside the porcelain jars and handsome vases which decorated the mantelpiece. At what hour had the clock stopped? When the vibration of its pendulum ceased, did the hollow death-tick in the wall take up the monotone of time and deepen the shadows with its ironical imitation of the clock, as if death himself were in the room, and this tick the sound of his watch?

From time to time I could hear the creak of footsteps overhead, the movement of a servant in the upper room who had volunteered to watch by the side of the sick girl during the night. I felt singularly lonely; but my loneliness was in some degree supported by a sentiment of pride. I was the

mistress of Ashleigh Manor, though my reign might not last a week. I tasted the pleasure of dominion, and liked the flavour. Above all was it gratifying to me to know the sincerity of Mr. Merton's confidence in me. The modest and becoming sense of my own unworthiness might always qualify his warmest assurance of the faith he reposed in me; but I could not doubt the honesty of that assurance when supported by such an illustration as that with which he had honoured me. He had not only placed me as mistress for the time over his house and his servants, he had singled me out to obey the injunction contained in his letter; and though I had no conception of its nature, I might be sure that the duty was delicate enough to demand for its discharge one in whom he had the profoundest confidence.

I hardly know at what hour I fell asleep, or how long my slumber lasted; but I was suddenly awakened by a sharp and continuous knocking on the door.

I sat up in my bed and called out "Who is that?"

A voice which I instantly recognised as Mr. Merton's replied,

"Rise at once and dress yourself. Laura

is ill. Lose no time; I must summon the other servants."

Terrified by the deep agitation expressed in his voice, I hastily rose, lighted a candle, and in a few moments had hurried on some articles of clothing. I opened my door, and stepping into the gallery, observed that the hall lamp was lighted. Whilst I was descending the stairs Mr. Merton came out of the bedroom he had hitherto occupied, and through which he had no doubt made his way to the floor on which the servants slept. He followed me hastily and exclaimed,—

"Laura has the fever—I am sure of it. She awakened crying, complaining of thirst, and her head burns. Is her former bedroom ready?"

"I will see."

"No, come with me. Bring that candle. I shall want you to light me through the rooms whilst I carry her to this wing. She cannot be attended to properly where she is now."

He went hastily downstairs, crossed the hall, and followed by me, passed through the ante-room into the old house. He walked rapidly, frequently looking behind him to see if I followed. When he reached the Angels'

Court, he almost ran across the gallery; and I, remembering the anger I had incurred by even seeming to linger in this spot made mysterious by his manner, darted quickly after him. On we went, along a gloomy corridor, through more chambers, up a narrow staircase, and eventually entered the rooms he had occupied during the afternoon. Four lighted candles stood on a centre table. He pushed open a door, and admitted me into a bedroom, and there I saw Laura sitting up in a little bed. I ran to her and took her in my arms, and as she laid her head against my breast, I felt that her cheeks were burning.

Mr. Merton pulled a blanket off his bed, which he stretched out, and told me to hold Laura up whilst he wrapped her in it.

"Do you think it wise to carry her through the cold air?" I asked.

"It must be," he answered quickly, "who is to look after her here? See the time that will be wasted in having to come through these cursed rooms to this wing. Quick! hold her up."

I did as he bade me; he swathed her in the blanket, and took her in his arms.

"Blow out those lights," he said, "and precede me with your candle."

In a few moments we were hurrying with what speed we might to the west wing.

"If her own bed is not ready," he exclaimed, as we went up the gallery staircase, "I will lay her in yours."

"That will be best, sir," I replied, entering my bedroom. I smoothed the bed I had left but ten minutes before, and Mr. Merton laid the poor child down upon it.

"Watch by her," he told me, "whilst I see if the doctor has been sent for."

He left the room, and I heard him hurrying down the gallery staircase. Laura lay regarding me with heavy, languid eyes. There was a crimson spot on either cheek, and a listlessness in her manner that made me terribly afraid that she was sickening for the fever. "Great heaven!" I thought, looking at her sweet face, "if Mr. Merton loses her he will go mad." I sat beside her without speaking, and presently she closed her eyes. She was heavy with sleep, but she could not sleep; for she opened her eyes very soon, and once more fixed a languid gaze upon me.

After a few minutes' absence Mr. Merton returned.

"I have sent the footman for both doctors," he exclaimed, panting with his exertions, and

pressing a handkerchief to his forehead: "so that if Mr. Graves be out, Dr. Lorton may be brought."

Then looking at Laura, he asked in a breathless whisper:

"What do you think, Miss Malcolmson? Is she sickening?"

"I fear she is, sir."

"Oh, God," he cried, clenching his hands; "what a blow! What a blow! Look now at the use of my precautions!"

Bending over her he exclaimed in a voice trembling with emotion, "Tell me how you feel, my little lamb?"

She smiled at him and answered, "I feel sleepy, papa," and her heavy eyelids drooped again.

His face looked white in the candlelight. Never was agony of mind so piteously expressed. He went to the door, listened, returned, looked at Laura, paced the room, going again to the door, and from time to time looking at me with such forlorn eyes that you would have thought his heart was breaking. "Will it not be deserved?" he once said in a low voice to himself, standing near the bedside, with his hands clasped. I tried to console him by whispering, "She

may be spared to you, even if this should prove the fever. Let me implore you to be calm until you have seen the doctor." He pressed his hand to his heart and shook his head. He made no other reply, nor indeed did he speak again until the arrival of the doctor.

This proved to be Mr. Graves. He drew to the bedside; but though I believe that in his mind he had little doubt of what ailed the child, he refused to affirm that she was sickening for the fever.

"She is ill," he said, "and she is certainly sickening for some malady; but I cannot positively pronounce until to-morrow—until, indeed, there are more decided symptoms to go by than are now visible."

Something like an expression of relief softened the pain in Mr. Merton's face; but the momentary hope soon vanished.

"Why do you not prepare me for the worst?" he said, "why buoy me up with hope?"

The doctor, however, politely but firmly reiterated his words; and having desired me to sit up with the child during the night, gave me his instructions and departed, announcing his intention to call early in the morning.

The hours that passed are deeply scored

in my memory. I never quitted the room for an instant; but neither did Mr. Merton. He took a chair at the head of the bed, and sat with his eyes fixed upon Laura, who, as the night wore away, grew more restless, dozing uneasily, and starting from her unrestful sleep with a cry. Sometimes his eyes closed, and I thought he slept; but they would suddenly open, and a deep sigh escape him.

How weary, how interminable are the vigils in a sick-room! How eerie the interests which the most familiar objects attach to themselves in the heavy eyes of the watcher! The tick of the clock was so mournful that I longed to stop it. The deep mystery of human life grew oppressive in the illustration I found in listening to Laura's breathing. How wonderful the mechanism of that small body! that pulsing of the little heart which might, if sickness or accident spared her, continue for how many years? I withdrew my interest from her and fastened it on myself. I looked at my hand and arm and thought of them as things which were independent of me; and even so of my whole body; until my familiar Self became an abstraction and my body a wonder on which I could gaze with the curiosity of a bystander. A species of hysteria seized me;

yet never did the existence of the soul, as something divisible or separate from the flesh that formed its tenement, impress me so powerfully. Then my thoughts flew upwards to the wise and great God whose near and awful Presence I seemed to feel through that sense of human mortality which sickness or the shadow of death brings with it. I felt that His eye was keeping watch over that little child, and I thought that were it not for the dreadful pang the separation would give to the love of the devoted father whose hungry gaze could scarce remove itself from the sweet young face, it would be better for her to leave us now and nestle in the bosom of her Saviour whilst her heart was innocent and pure and acceptable to Him, than linger out her brief span here and give the world time to soil the brightness of her soul and rob it of the chaste equipment that now made it fit for heaven. And yet to part with her! to part for ever with this loving little companion of mine! this gentle creature who had so often cheered and delighted me with her prattle, whose tender heart had so often shed the fragrance of its love to soothe and comfort me! The mere apprehension of her death was made deeply pathetic by the recollection that in her

life she had never known a mother's love. And was it not in a great measure this thought which caused Mr. Merton to enfold her in his heart and supply by his own caresses the absence of that divine and touching memory in his child which is every good mother's legacy to her little ones?

It was not until the afternoon of the following day that the unequivocal symptoms of the fever manifested themselves. The child grew rapidly worse; delirium set in; the fever exhibited its most malignant aspect. The doctor watched her day and night. From the wildest demonstrations of grief, Mr. Merton had settled into apathetic despair. He quitted his child's room never longer than an hour each morning. All day, all night he sat with his petrified face at the head of the bed, an image of misery heart-breaking to look upon. As the days crawled by he would ask, "What hope?" That was his only question. The doctor begged him to take some rest. No; he preferred remaining with his child. He hardly tasted food. His meals were brought him to the sick-room; but the tray was repeatedly removed with the contents untouched.

At the end of the week the servant who

had been stricken with the fever died. There was universal consternation in the house. Some of the servants gave notice and left; a few remained but went about their duties like persons in a dream. But for me I think matters would have stood still. I cannot tell why I should have had more spirit than the others; yet I do not remember ever having felt the least fear of being taken with the fever. My duties were numerous, and they were made heavy to me by the want of rest. My place at night was in the sick-room; indeed the doctor could not have done without me. Mr. Merton was of no use; had he been a stone figure he could not have been more idle and helpless in this time of his great anguish.

During the whole period of Laura's sickness I do not remember ever taking more than two hours' rest at a time. Yet for her sake and Mr. Merton's, towards whom in his sorrow my heart yearned, I went about my duties bravely and cheerfully, and did all I could to lighten the labours of the servants and the doctor's devoted, weary watching in the sick-room.

I don't think that Mr. Merton ever had a moment's hope that Laura would be spared to him since the first hour of her illness. To such a love as he bore his child is sometimes

given a keen and delicate perception which makes the future substantial by antedating, under the figure of presentiment, its movements and decrees. Nor is it impossible but that between parent and child there may exist certain fine and subtle sympathies—Mr. Merton himself believed so—which make the one feel the secret shadow or shine which rests upon the spirit of the other as if his own spirit were thus radiant or gloomy with coming happiness or coming calamity. Thus it was I firmly believed that that shadow of death which lay on Laura was discernible from the onset by Mr. Merton, who felt in himself the presentiment which, had she been older, his child would have shared. This would cause his stony immobility of face—the severe expression of despair which no hope rose to soften. Night after night for seven days had he remained in Laura's room idly watching her. His features grew haggard, his eyes bloodshot from the want of sleep; his very hands grew lean like those of a sick man; and his paleness took an ashen hue which made him look twenty years older than he was. The doctor ceased to importune him to take rest; his request had been made at last ironical by the invariable negative that was returned.

At last the crisis came.

The night was a still one: so still that I felt that nature herself was sympathising with our anguish and anxiety, and holding her breath until the issue of the crisis should be known. The little creature awoke from a long delirum; her eyes met her father's and she recognised him. The doctor stood by the bedside, pale, austere, anxious. Mr. Merton gave no sign of life but a deep and difficult panting.

The unutterable dulness weighed upon me like lead. The shadows seemed to deepen as we waited. Was it that death had entered the room and was waiting among us until life should have delivered to his keeping the frail creature whose pure soul the Almighty God had summoned?

Great heaven! what a wreck had the cruel fever made of the little child! how attenuated and pinched were those features which had been wont to look up at me with the rosy colouring of health and eloquent with the sacred mirth of innocence! The outline of the little form under the bed-clothes—the small, feeble hand upon the coverlid—the gold-coloured hair streaming upon the pillow—the wasted face out of which nothing of the

pure sweetness had passed—how suggestive of helplessness! how did this little girl seem to appeal to us to give her relief! It is this despairful suggestion of helplessness that makes a child's sickness so piteously pleading. The heavy eyes turning their dumb complaint upon the bystanders as if *they* were the cause of the child's sufferings and could relieve it if they would; the sense of the short life it has passed and all the pain that has been crowded into its few poor years; the irreverent but natural protest against the injustice done to the frail creature by its life being cut off just as it is emerging from the sickness and dangers of infancy; as we feel it cruel to pluck a bud, though we may have little compassion in cutting the full-blown flower; these are the conditions which make a child's sickness or death so heavy a grief to witness even by those who know not what it is to lose a child.

More oppressive grew the stillness; and ever the shadows seemed to deepen, as if some invisible hand were drawing a soft curtain of cloud around the little being whom the angels were already leaning from heaven to welcome. And yet the candles burned steadily. But the gloom of the spirit will sometimes make a material gloom to the eyes; and such was

the gloom that in my sight filled the air and made the beams of the candle-flames ineffectual.

The practised eye of the doctor witnessed a change, and he started. The movement or the expression in his face was remarked by Mr. Merton. He sprang from his chair.

"Is she dying?" he asked hoarsely.

"I fear ——"

A deep groan burst from the father's lips, and he flung himself down on his knees by the bedside, seizing the tiny hand of his child.

"My God! my God!" he cried looking upwards; "is this Thy sentence? Is this my penance?"

"Speak to him," whispered the doctor to me, greatly agitated; but I was staring at the child's face, over which had spread an expression of peace so absolute, of calm so unspeakable, of happiness so rapt, that I knew the signs to mean death.

"Oh, doctor!" I said, bursting into tears, "she is dead!"

Mr. Merton rose slowly from his knees and looked at her, inclined his head, and pressed his lips to her mouth, then turned away, and walked towards the door. I did not see his face, but before he had made half-

a-dozen steps he staggered. The doctor ran to him and supported him by the arm.

"Go quick and get me some brandy," he cried to me.

I seized one of the candles, hastened down stairs, took from the sideboard in the dining-room a bottle of brandy and a wine-glass, and returned.

Mr. Merton had fallen into a chair, his head bowed upon his breast, his right hand outstretched upon his knee, the other hanging down as if lifeless.

"Drink," exclaimed the doctor, filling the glass and putting it to his lips.

But Mr. Merton, raising his hand, waved the glass away, and after a short struggle rose to his feet.

"Help me to my room, doctor," he said, in a voice so heart-broken that the very sound of it made me turn quickly aside and cry bitterly.

Leaning on the arm of the doctor, and tottering like an aged man, Mr. Merton went from the room, and I was left alone with the dead.

CHAPTER XIV.

I RESTORE THE LETTER.

AM I not writing a doleful story? Will you thank me for this tale of grief and death and crime? In days when art was less exacting than it is now, it was permissible to relieve the sombre declamation of sorrow by the wise nonsense of a fool; and Tom O'Bedlam could drive sharp-edged laughter into the stately grief of the more heroical madman. But it is now ordered that we are to relate only the experiences which befel us; and if no zany happen to come our way, we must try and do without the mirthful jangling of the cap and bells.

The morning that followed that night of death was as gay and beautiful as if the life it coloured and inspirited were its immortal toy.

The fountains tumbled their spray into the marble basins as joyously as if the young child who had so often searched their depths and found an elfish companion in the sunny-haired being that smiled up at her, were coming again to listen to their babbling. The birds sang their triumphant songs, as if death and sorrow had been swept away for ever by the trailing skirts of the departed night, and left no record of their presence behind.

I looked forth upon the grounds, with eyes heavy with watching and sore with tears, and beheld them beautiful and brilliant as they had ever been when our darling's sport had given them an Arcadian charm through the freshness and innocence her soft laughter and nimble graces had spread around. And did I expect nature to sympathise with our sorrow, don her sables, and weep heavy tears from her leaden-coloured eyes? Yes, in the first moment of my sorrow I could have taken her into my confidence and bidden her blind for awhile that sparkling sun whose laughing beams mocked my grief.

Oh, how I mourned my playmate and companion, my gentle darling pupil. No sisters ever loved each other more than we. It seemed as if some pure light had been

suddenly extinguished; as if some touching and lovely song had abruptly ceased — so deep was the gloom, so oppressive the silence that fell upon my heart when I thought of her.

I saw nothing of Mr. Merton all that day, nor yet the next. The servants told me he was in the library; and there he remained with his misery from morning till night, the door closed, taking no food, and seeing no one. He gave his orders for the funeral in writing. The neighbours called and left sympathising messages. Lady Callender and her daughter came and received from my lips an account of Laura's illness and death, and were really moved to hear of Mr. Merton's grief. But I refused to take their messages to him. I told them that I could not intrude upon him. He must summon me before I entered the room in which he sat alone. Sorrow had consecrated the ground on which he trod; I would not disturb him myself, nor would I suffer others to disturb him.

The burial had to take place shortly; the nature of the malady of which Laura had died forbade delay.

Not having seen Mr. Merton, I knew not whether it was his intention to follow the

coffin; judging of the vehemence of his grief by his isolation, I thought that he would not attend. On the morning of the funeral, as I was leaving the drawing-room on my way to the servants'-hall, I heard a door open, and to my surprise saw Mr. Merton come out of the ante-room, which you must well know now as conducting to the old house. I say, to my surprise; because I could not conceive his object in penetrating those dreary rooms in his present state of mind.

He walked to the library-door, and seeing me, beckoned. I followed him with the feeling of awe and reverence which great grief inspires in its beholders. I was grieved to see his face; for, thin as he had of late become, his features were now haggard to a degree that made his countenance ghastly.

He closed the door, and approaching me, took my hand and held it for some moments without speaking.

"How is life with you?" he said, presently, in a voice whose hollowness made it unfamiliar to my ear: "is it not robbed of its light and colour and hope? Can you ever be happy again? *I* may say that I can never more be happy—but that is no disappoint-

ment. Years ago happiness left me and made my heart blank. But, oh, God! it never before knew this pain."

He let fall my hand, and walked with uneven steps to an arm-chair, indicating with his hand a wish that I should be seated.

"I cannot attend the funeral," he continued, after an interval of silence. "It would break me down to see her coffin—to hear the dull earth clattering on it. Who will protect me now? Where is the light gone that cheered and illuminated my path, and made me walk securely? Where is the innocence gone, which, being born of me, I felt to be mine, which supported me and stood between my heart and the hell——," he stopped short; sighed wearily, and passed the back of his hand across his forehead.

"If God is merciful and good," he said mournfully, bending his head forward, "why does He let loose such a robber as Death upon the world? or if Death be a necessity, why should it not take a material form so that the man whose pet lamb is torn from him may follow and give battle to this accursed wolf, and wrest if he can his treasure, his joy, his blessing, from it? Tell me how I may recover my

child," he cried, raising his voice and gesticulating; "and would I not pursue this Death that has taken her from me, and let my life bleed from me drop by drop away rather than relinquish—relinquish——."

Once more he paused, and again he passed his hand across his forehead, looking at me vacantly, and with such an expression on his face as rendered it for the moment meaningless.

He appeared to recover his mind with an effort, bit his lip, and taking a biscuit from a plate on the table, munched it hungrily though absently.

"I wish you would allow me to order you something more substantial for your lunch than those biscuits," I said. "You have had no breakfast I fear."

"No, I have been starving myself. I feel so weak that I can hardly support myself. My memory or my brain is going, too, from want of nourishment. See to this, Miss Malcolmson."

"I will, sir. Let me go at once and get you some breakfast." I half rose.

"Stop a moment. I have fasted some days—I can hold out until lunch-time. Then give me a good meal. I must not starve my-

self. I have other duties—no, no, don't misunderstand me—light duties—things that—that . . . . Give me now while I think to ask you, the letter I charged you to keep."

"It is in my desk."

"Please go and fetch it."

I went out, and after a few minutes returned. I noticed as he took the letter that he gave a quick keen glance at the seals; but this, it was plain by his manner, he would not have wished me to see. He lighted a taper, and held the envelope in the flame until it and its contents were destroyed. He threw the ashes into the grate, and, sinking his head, fell to drumming quietly on the table.

"You don't want me to say anything about this letter, do you?"

"No sir."

"That is right. You have no curiosity, and I wish you to have none; if you had, I could not confide in you even to the extent of asking you to take charge of a sealed document. For aught I can tell I may some day want to confide in you to a much greater degree than this. Preserve my confidence by showing—no, not by showing, that would be of no use—by feeling no curiosity."

"I will try, sir."

"That is honest. That is better than saying you will."

He changed his voice.

"They bury my little lamb to-day; but I could not be present. No, no; the sight of her little coffin would break my heart. Do I look very ill?"

"Yes, but you will look and feel better when you have taken rest and food."

"I will leave myself in your hands, Miss Malcolmson. You shall prescribe for me. I am a broken-hearted, broken-spirited man. You are a kind, sincere girl—my lost one's friend and playmate. Will you give me the friendship you had for her?"

"You have always had it," I replied, with great emotion.

"Would to God I deserved it. Well, with you in the house I shall feel that I am not without a friend. But perhaps you mean to leave me?"

"It is not my wish to leave you, sir; but I fear that I shall be of no use to you now."

"You think that death has taken your occupation away. See what a robber this Death is! how it smites with a two-handed sword, never killing one without bruising and maim-

ing another. Did you say that you would be of no use to me?"

"I feared so."

"Why do you fear? Is the occupation of housekeeper too humble for you?"

"No."

He was silent for a short time, and then cried passionately.

"How can I talk and reason on such matters when they are coming to bury my child? I have sometimes thought Death no very serious trial—a pang, a sigh, and a deep sleep more profound and restful than anything we can conceive in life, because it is dreamless. Are these things a trial? I suffer now ten thousand times more than I shall suffer on my death-bed. It is frightful to die in life and yet live on. Do you understand me? I mean it is frightful for the better part of a man to die and for him to continue feeling. But I know now where the true horror of death lies—its horror is its legacy to those who remain behind: those it takes it hushes and soothes like a mother."

Whilst he spoke I had heard the sounds of feet in the hall: muffled indeed, with the practised cunning which is the professional sympathy undertakers give to rich people;

about the dwellings of the poor they tread as though shod with iron.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, raising his forefinger. He listened a moment, and exclaimed, "Go to them; they will want you let no one come near me."

Without a word I rose and quitted the room.

END OF VOL. II.

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